1914 – The Train Has Whistled – Short story

Scene inspired by *The Train Has Whistled* (1914), a short story by Luigi Pirandello. Belluca gazes towards a distant train, evoking the contrast between his oppressive routine and the freedom of imagination. Image created by PirandelloWeb.

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An obedient clerk suddenly behaves in a way that leaves his colleagues baffled. The man they have always regarded as a tireless, almost

mechanical worker seems to have discovered something that makes his familiar world impossible to endure in the old way. Through Belluca's unexpected change, Luigi Pirandello explores the gulf between outward appearances and inner life, and the fragile possibility of freedom within an existence consumed by duty.

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Short story details

First publication

Corriere della Sera, 22 February 1914; later included in *La trappola* (Treves, 1915).

Collection

L'uomo solo, 1922, in *Novelle per un anno*.

Main character

Belluca, an overburdened accounting clerk; his colleagues and supervisor; his dependent family.

Narrative structure

A retrospective narrative that begins with an apparent mental breakdown and gradually reveals the personal circumstances and the experience behind it.

The Train Has Whistled – 1914

English translation by Bradford A. Masoni, from Pirandello in Translation (2022).

He was raving. Early stages of brain fever, the doctors said. And all his office mates kept repeating it too, as they walked in groups of two or three back from the hospital where they had just been to visit him. **[1]**

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[1] The term translated as ‘hospital’ here is ‘ospizio’ in Italian, which finds no exact correspondence in English. No longer in current use, ospizio does not designate a place for people who are dying, like the etymologically-related ‘hospice’ in English. Yet it is different from a typical hospital, as well, since it is not responsible for providing immediate medical assistance but rather is for longer stays, mainly for elderly people, in some ways closer to a nursing home. An ospizio also has different care units, including one for mental health, hence later in the story there is reference to a kind of psychiatric ward.

They seemed to particularly enjoy announcing the news using scientific terms—only just learned from the doctors—to any late-coming colleagues they met along the way:

“Delirium, delirium.”

“Encephalitis.”

“Meningitis.”

“Brain fever.”

And they tried to look distressed, but deep down they were so happy, not least because they had fulfilled their duty. In the fullness of health, they exited that sad hospital into the merry blue of the clear winter morning.

“Will he die? Will he go crazy?”

“Who can say?”

“Die? I doubt it…”

“But what’s he saying? What’s he saying?”

“The same thing over and over again. He’s delirious.”
“Poor Belluca!”
And it didn’t occur to any of them that, given the very particular conditions in which that unfortunate man had lived for so many years, his case could also be considered completely natural—that everything Belluca was saying, which seemed to everyone like delirium, a symptom of his madness, **[2]** could rather be the simplest explanation for his completely natural condition.

> **[2]** One of the most recurring tropes in Pirandello’s fictional works, madness is often portrayed as being feigned or else as the character’s solution to their own existential malaise. In this story, insanity is also a metaphor for the search for one’s own true self, and it represents a creative attempt to break the barriers limiting individual freedom.

In reality, the previous evening, Belluca had proudly rebelled against his manager, and then, following the manager's bitter reproach, had all but hurled himself at him. That fact itself lent considerable weight to the idea that Belluca was experiencing a profound mental breakdown.

Because it was impossible to imagine a man more meek and submissive, more methodical and patient than Belluca.

Constrained… yes, who had called him that? One of his colleagues. Poor Belluca was constrained within the very narrow limits of his arid accounting job, with no memories beyond those of open accounts, single-entry, double entry, reversing entries. Deductions, withdrawals, and settlements. Notes, master ledgers, meeting minutes, and on and on. He was a walking filing cabinet, or even better, an old mule pulling his cart, never complaining, always at the same pace, always on the same road, always wearing blinders.
Well, this old donkey had been whipped a hundred times, whipped mercilessly, just for laughs, for the sake of seeing if they could get him to react even a little; prick up his dejected ears, maybe, or even better, give a sign that he wanted to lift a foot and fire off a few kicks. Nothing! He had always submissively taken their unjust lashes and cruel shots without so much as a word, as if he deserved them, or rather, as if he no longer felt them, accustomed as he had become over years and years to the continuous and solemn beatings fate had doled out **[3]**

> **[3]** Together with fortune, fate in Pirandello frames the tragic moment in which the character is forced to face his own misery. The protagonist of this story is trapped in a fixed, external form of existence that he has enabled through his own passive acceptance of conditions, until chance reminds him of the dynamic vitality of life outside that form.

His rebellion was all the more inconceivable, therefore, unless, of course, it was the result of a sudden mental breakdown.

All the more so since the previous evening he had actually deserved to be reprimanded—his office manager had genuinely had the right to tell him off. Already that morning he had turned up to work with an unusual, new air about him, and—and this was truly enormous, comparable, I don't know, to the collapse of a mountain—he had come in more than half an hour late.

All of a sudden, it seemed that his face had grown wider. It seemed that his blinders had suddenly fallen off, and in a moment the spectacle of life opened wide all around him.. It was as if his ears had suddenly become unblocked, allowing him to perceive for the first time voices and sounds he had never heard before.

And that is how he had presented himself at the office that morning: so happy, overflowing with a vague, dazed happiness. And all day long he had done nothing.

That evening, the manager had walked into Belluca's office having examined the books and registers and then,

"But how on earth? What have you been up to all day?"

Belluca had looked at him smiling, almost with an air of impudence, opening his hands.

"What is that supposed to mean?" the office manager had then exclaimed, approaching him and taking him by the shoulder and shaking him. "Hey, Belluca!" "Nothing," Belluca replied, still with that smile that sat somewhere between impudence and imbecility on his lips. "The train, **[4]** Signor Cavaliere." **[5]**

[4] The emblem of displacement par excellence, the train is a recurring icon in Pirandello's narrative and symbolizes the possibility of otherness. Likewise, here the train is also a figure that represents the character's self-transformation.

[5] Cavaliere, which literally translates as "knight," is an honorary title that in formal settings indicates someone has been decorated by the State. Commonly, however, and more so in Pirandello's time, this honorific title was essentially a recognition of social status rather than of a particular or official distinction of military prowess or nobility.

"The train? What train?"

"It whistled."

"What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Last night, Signor Cavaliere. It whistled. I heard it whistle…"

"The train?"

"Yessir. And if you only knew where I ended up! Siberia… or, or… the rainforests of the Congo … It only takes an instant, Signor Cavaliere!"
>Hearing the shouts of the enraged office manager, the other employees had entered the room and, when they heard Belluca talking like that, had burst into mad bouts of laughter. **[6]**

[6] Pirandello often pairs laughter with folly in order to prompt reflection on the absurdity of life. This is central to the logic of his particular vision of humor

(umorismo), which he understands as bridging the comic and tragic and subverting societal codes.

Annoyed by all that laughter, the office manager—who must have been in a bad mood that evening—had flown into a rage and began to beat that timid man, who had been the victim of so many of his cruel pranks.

Except this time, the victim, to everyone’s astonishment and almost terror, had fought back. He had railed against the office manager, continuing to shout that nonsense about the train having whistled and that now, by God, not anymore, now that he had heard the train whistle he just couldn’t anymore, he could no longer stand to be treated this way.

They had seized him by force, restrained him, and dragged him to the psychiatric ward.

Even here, he was still going on and on, talking about that train. He imitated its whistle. And what a plaintive whistle it was, as if it were far away in the night, wailing. And immediately after, he added:

“All aboard! All aboard… Where to, gentlemen? Where to?”

And he looked at everyone with eyes that were no longer his. Those eyes—usually dark, dull, furrowed—now laughed at them and shone with complete clarity, like those of a child or a happy man. Meaningless sentences escaped his lips. Unheard of things—poetic, imaginative, bizarre expressions, which were all the more astounding because it was impossible to explain by what miracle they flowed so freely from the mouth of a man whose world up to now had been limited to figures and registers and catalogs. A man who had always lived as if he were blind and deaf

to life. An accounting machine.**[7]**

> **[7]** The description of Belluca as a kind of accounting machine here is reminiscent of Pirandello's description of the protagonist Serafino Gubbio in *Shoot!: The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cameraman* (*Si gira... / Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*, 1916/25), who is reduced to a machine registering events without participating in them. This theme of being cut off from life recurs throughout Pirandello's corpus and reflects both anxieties about technological modernity but also a broader existential outlook in the author's work.

Now he spoke of the *blue foreheads* of snowy mountains raised to the sky; he spoke of teeming schools of slimy cetaceans *wagging* their tails on the bottoms of seas. Things, I repeat, unheard of.

But whichever of his coworkers it was that came to relate them to me together with the news of his sudden mental breakdown was disconcerted, for—not surprisingly—he could not understand why I did not share his astonishment.

In fact, I kept silent when I heard the story.

And my silence was full of grief. I shook my head, and with the corners of my mouth turned down, I said bitterly:
"Belluca, gentlemen, is not crazy. Rest assured he's not crazy. Something must have happened to him, but nothing could be more natural. The only reason no one has been able to explain it is no one really knows how this man has lived up to now.**[8]**

> **[8]** This moment in the story aptly frames the core of Pirandello's poetics of

humor as a contradictory notion in which the “opposite” we perceive through comedy changes into the “feeling of the opposite” that penetrates us empathetically at a deeper emotional level.

I, who do know, am sure I’ll be able to explain everything very naturally just as soon as I’ve seen him and talked to him.”
As I walked to the hospital where the poor man had been taken, I reflected to myself: **[9]**

[9] Reflection plays a pivotal role in Pirandello’s poetics of humor, where it manifests as an impulsive, creative force that disrupts perception and prompts an emotional shift in understanding. As we see in the plot of this story, reflection elicits compassion by prompting us to reconsider the impact of existential adversities on the individual.
For a man who lives as Belluca has lived thus far, that is, an “impossible” life, the most obvious and minor thing—the most ordinary accident, any very slight, unexpected stumbling block, say, a pebble on the road—can produce extraordinary effects. And no one can explain these effects without taking into account the fact that the life of this man is just that: “impossible.” For therein is precisely where the explanation lies, attached to those conditions of his impossible life. Once that is taken into account, everything will seem simple and clear. Anyone who sees only a tail and disregards the monster to which it belongs may well see the tail as being monstrous in itself. Once it is reattached to the monster, however, it will no longer seem so; it will be seen for what it must be: a thing belonging to that monster.

A perfectly natural tail.

I had never seen a man live like Belluca.

I was his neighbor, and I was not alone among the other tenants of the building in wondering how that man could endure those living conditions.
He had living with him three blind women: his wife, his mother-in-law, and his mother-in-law's sister. These last two, who were very old, were blind as a result of cataracts. His wife did not suffer from cataracts but was simply permanently blind: walled-up eyelids.**[10]**

> **[10]** The same image of a "walled-up eye" returns in Cecè, the one-act play staged in 1915 but composed in 1913 in Agrigento, while Pirandello was visiting his wife, who was recovering from a nervous breakdown. The plot explores corruption and dishonest conduct in high places through the actions of the bon vivant Cecè, who often looks the other way to navigate the society in which he lightheartedly operates. A "walled-up eye" characterizes the ruthless loan shark who helps Cecè with his stratagem to regain possession of some promissory notes.

All three women demanded to be served. They screamed from morning till night because no one was serving them. There were also two widowed daughters, who had returned home after the deaths of their husbands. One daughter had four, the other three children, but neither ever had the time or desire to look after the little ones; if either lifted a finger, it was only to help their mother.

How could Belluca feed all those mouths with the meager income from his accounting job? He got himself extra work copying out documents, which he did at home in the evenings. And copy he did, amidst the wild screams of those five women and those seven children until they—all twelve of them—found themselves space in the only three beds in the house.

Large, double beds to be sure, but only three.

Violent scuffles, chases, overturned furniture, broken dishes, crying, screaming, tumbling, because one of the children had run away in the dark and hidden himself in the separate bed his grandmothers shared. Those three old blind women, meanwhile, also quarreled every night among themselves because none of them wanted to sleep in the middle and each rebelled furiously when it came to be her turn.

Eventually, the house was silent and Belluca continued to copy until late into the night, until his pen fell out of his hand and his eyes closed of their own accord.

He would then throw himself, often fully clothed, on the rickety sofa and immediately sink into a leaden sleep from which every morning he would barely be able to rouse himself, more dazed than ever.

So you see, gentlemen, what happened to Belluca was completely natural, given his living conditions.

When I went to see him in the hospital, he told me about it himself in the greatest detail. He was still impassioned, to be sure, but that was *completely natural* given what had happened to him. He laughed at the doctors and nurses and at all of his colleagues who thought he was crazy.

“I wish!” he said. “I wish!”

Gentlemen, Belluca had forgotten for many, many years—truly forgotten—that the world existed.

Immersed in the continual torment of his unfortunate existence, absorbed all day long in his ledgers at the office, without even a moment of respite, like a blindfolded

beast yoked to the pole of a waterwheel or a mill, yessir, he had forgotten for years and years—truly forgotten— that the world existed.

Two nights before, he had thrown himself onto that shabby couch in a fit of exhaustion, but perhaps due to his excessive tiredness, he hadn’t been able to fall asleep right away. And suddenly, in the deep silence of the night, he heard a train whistle from afar.

It had seemed to him that after so many years—who knows how—his ears were suddenly unblocked.

The whistle of that train had suddenly and violently taken away the misery of all those terrible hardships that defined his life, and, almost as if from an uncovered tomb, he had found himself moving around and gasping for air in the expansive void of the world that had opened up wide all around him.

He had instinctively clung to the blankets he threw over himself every night and had run with his thoughts after that train flying off into the night.

There was … Oh! … there was, outside that horrendous little house, far from all his torments, there was the world! So much world, so far away, but toward which that train was heading … Florence, Bologna, Turin, Venice … so many cities, cities he had visited as a young man and whose lights must certainly still be sparkling on the earth that night. Yes, he knew the kind of life people lived there! It was the same life he had led once, long ago. And that life had gone on. It had always gone on, while he remained here like a blindfolded beast turning the shaft of a mill. He had forgotten all about it! He had closed himself off from the world, in the torment of his house, in the arid, prickly narrowness of his accounting job … But now—behold!—the world was violently pouring back into him, into his spirit. When that moment

struck him, here, in this prison of his, an electric thrill coursed through the world, and he could follow it with his suddenly awakened imagination. Yes, he could follow it through cities known and unknown, moors, mountains, forests, seas … This same thrill, this same rush of time. While he was living his “impossible” life here, there were so many millions of men scattered all over the earth who lived differently. At the very moment that he was suffering here, there were solitary mountains covered in snow raising their *blue foreheads* to the night sky … Yes, yes, he could see them, he could see them, he could see them all so clearly … there were oceans … forests …

And so, now that the world had entered his spirit again, he could find some small consolation! Yes, rising from time to time from his torment, he could breathe the air of the wider world using his imagination.**[11]**

> **[11]** The power of fantasy functions here as a coping mechanism for the character, who is liberated from the constraints of his life through the imaginary vision of other possibilities. The consolation of beauty and imagination are recurring themes in Pirandello’s work; see, for instance, the conclusion of his story “*Interviews with Characters*” (“Colloquii coi personaggi,” 1915).

That was enough for him!

It only stood to reason that on that first day he had gone too far. He had gotten drunk. The whole world all at once: a cataclysm. Gradually, he would pull himself together. He was still drunk from too much air, he could feel it.

As soon as he had completely composed himself, he would apologize to the office manager and would resume his bookkeeping as before. Only now the office manager wouldn’t expect too much of him, as he had in the past. And from time to

time—between one account entry and the next—he would have to grant him a quick visit to, yes, Siberia … or, or … to the rainforests of the Congo.

“It can be done in an instant, my dear Signor Cavaliere. Now that the train has whistled…”

Summary

At the beginning of the story, Belluca, a normally meek and reliable accounting clerk, is said to have suffered a nervous collapse. His colleagues discuss his strange behaviour with a mixture of curiosity, complacency and apparently medical certainty. He has arrived late, neglected his work and finally rebelled against the supervisor whose reprimands he had always accepted without protest. Repeatedly mentioning a train whistle, he appears incomprehensible to everyone who knows him only through his place in the office. A narrator familiar with Belluca, however, suggests that there may be a perfectly intelligible explanation for this supposed madness.

The explanation emerges when the oppressive conditions of Belluca’s private life come into view. His wages support a crowded household, including his blind wife and other dependent relatives, while his evenings are devoted to additional work. He has virtually no time to rest, think or imagine another existence. One night, hearing the whistle of a train in the distance, he is suddenly reminded that beyond his narrow routine there is an immense world of cities, landscapes and journeys. The sound awakens an imaginative freedom he had forgotten. His altered behaviour is not simply a rejection of all responsibilities: he begins to see that, even while continuing to live within them, he may reclaim an inner space that no employer or family obligation can entirely possess.

Analysis and meaning

Pirandello opens the narrative by placing Belluca under the gaze of others. Colleagues, doctors and the office hierarchy quickly agree that he has gone mad, yet their judgment is based on an exceedingly limited knowledge of his existence. What appears extraordinary is not an act of violence or a grand declaration, but the sudden refusal of an employee to behave as the predictable instrument everyone expects him to be. Belluca has been reduced to a function: accounting figures, repetitive gestures and unquestioning obedience have become his entire public identity. The metaphor of the burdened animal, always pulling the same cart, makes the cruelty of this reduction unmistakable. The supposed experts name his condition, but their vocabulary explains little because they never ask what kind of life has made his change possible. The opening thus dramatizes a central Pirandellian problem: the self others believe they know is only a rigid external form, not the full and changing reality of a person.

The story’s gradual reversal depends on its narrative design. The reader initially receives the event as gossip, from people who treat a fellow worker’s distress as a fascinating anomaly. Only later does the narrator reconstruct Belluca’s home and reveal the exhausting economic and emotional demands imposed upon him. This delay is crucial. It teaches us how readily we accept collective judgments when the circumstances behind a person’s conduct remain invisible. Once those circumstances are known, the meaning of the apparent breakdown changes. The irony becomes painful rather than merely comic: a man celebrated for his patience has been silently worn down by the very patience others exploit. Pirandello’s humour operates through this contrast between the outwardly ridiculous and the inwardly tragic, encouraging the reader to discover suffering beneath an event that society dismisses as absurd.

The whistle itself is a remarkably modest agent of transformation. The train does not carry Belluca away, and the narrative does not require a literal journey. A distant sound is sufficient to recover the idea of distance, of a world that exceeds the boundaries of his workplace and his cramped home. It restores to him the ability to imagine other places and ways of being. The importance of this discovery lies in its contrast with the grim material conditions of his life: the visible world has shrunk into endless duty, while the mind unexpectedly expands towards open horizons. The train therefore cannot be understood only as an emblem of escape in the conventional sense. It stands for an inner movement, the return of desire, perception and imagination. Belluca's apparent irrationality contains a new awareness that the office cannot measure, classify or discipline.

This awakening nevertheless remains precarious, and the story avoids proposing a simple cure for poverty or oppression. Belluca's obligations do not disappear because he has heard a whistle. His family still needs support, and the conditions that have confined him are still real. What changes is his relationship to those conditions: he can no longer mistake them for the whole of existence. That distinction gives the ending its restrained power. Pirandello neither romanticizes suffering nor promises that fantasy alone will transform social structures; instead, he reveals the deep human necessity of a mental interval beyond the roles imposed upon us. The distance between madness as a public diagnosis and freedom as a private experience remains the novella's most unsettling insight. Belluca is not liberated from his life, but he has rediscovered the possibility of looking beyond it.

Critical study

Belluca and the Rediscovery of the World

Riccardo Mainetti – By courtesy of the author

In italian

The World, the existence of the World for us, men and women of today, with our normal lives, does not seem to be a great thing, a great discovery; but let us put ourselves in the shoes of Belluca, the protagonist of the beautiful novella “The Train Whistled,” by Luigi Pirandello, contained in the collection “The Lonely Man” later reunited in the collection “Novellas for a Year,” who rediscovers the World in this way, suddenly, through a very normal event such as a train whistling, and we will fully understand its epochal significance.

Belluca, in fact, had forgotten about the World, the World with the life that flows through it and the lights that sparkle and make it beautiful and fascinating, forgotten yes!, you read that right! Entirely taken up as he was by his own life, a miserable life lived between the accounting office, where he performed a job, “of concept” as it would be said today, all immersed in numbers, between ledgers, simple and double entries and other “similar amenities” that have very little that is pleasant, and a house where he lives, as a recluse, together with a crowd of youngsters and three blind women, two, Belluca’s mother-in-law and her sister, due to cataracts, Belluca’s wife, we could say, due to a “congenital defect” called in the novella “walled eyelids.” In addition to this already abundant company, Belluca also hosts a couple of widowed daughters in the house who, however, take good care not to lend the slightest help in the house, limiting themselves, when they please, to taking care of their mother alone.

Do you understand now that, living as Belluca lives, as a recluse at home and as a “beast of burden” at the accounting office, the World tends to become, if not exactly a fantasy, at least something very distant and remote; something for other

people.

After so many years lived in this way, you understand how a simple thing like the whistle, however distant, of a train that makes him rediscover that there is an boundless World outside the walls of his horrible house and outside the accounting office where he toils day after day for the purpose of earning a living, can have effects that are nothing short of devastating on a person like our friend Belluca.

This shocking rediscovery leads Belluca to become so intoxicated with freedom and fresh, sparkling air that he abandons his own usual submissive nature which, for long, long years, has led him to tolerate any kind of harassment from the head of the office and his colleagues and to assume a tone and behavior that leads everyone to believe that the poor Belluca has had a sort of nervous breakdown that has led him to madness.

And indeed, after the “disorderly,” albeit perfectly natural, as Pirandello himself writes, reaction he had towards the head of the office, Belluca is taken to a hospice for the insane. Both in the office and, later, at the insane asylum, Belluca continues to repeat that he heard the train whistle.

This sort of behavior leads all those who visit him at the hospice to conclude that he has, in fact, gone mad or is, in any case, well on his way down the road that leads to madness. Only one person, a neighbor of Belluca, who knows well how the poor man has lived for so many years, having learned what Belluca keeps repeating, becomes convinced that Belluca is not at all mad but has only become intoxicated, excessively, with real life and the World and that his behavior is due to this and not to madness.

And furthermore, he learns of the intention of the author of this shocking

rediscovery, Belluca, to go, once he is “released” from the insane asylum, to the head of the office to apologize for his behavior and then declare himself ready again to resume his role at the accounting office.

Only, after having made the rediscovery of the World and its poetic beauty, he will ask the head of the office, from time to time, to “be lenient” and to let his imagination wander beyond the confines of the office to go, who knows, to the Congo or the Black Forest! After all, from someone who has made the rediscovery of the World, one cannot expect him to return to work with the blind composure of a beast of burden who is unaware of how much beauty and greatness there is beyond his own blinders!

Riccardo Mainetti

Pirandello in English

▶ **Pirandello in English**
▶ **Italian original – Il treno ha fischiato…**
▶ **Spanish translation – El tren ha silbado**

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