

IL PROFESSOR TERREMOTO (PROFESSOR EARTHQUAKE)

Luigi Pirandello

Analysis by Stefano Sbrana

Novella

Luigi Pirandello's 1910 short story *Il Professor Terremoto* (*Professor Earthquake*) is set against the backdrop of the earthquake that devastated Reggio Calabria and Messina in 1908. Pirandello's story exposes the fragility of the human condition and dismantles traditional notions of heroism and fate, underscoring how even the noblest acts can lead to an irredeemable "perpetual earthquake".

Year of Publication	1922
Publication Place	Firenze
Editor	Bemporad
Entity	1894 South Calabria earthquake
Collection	Novelle per un anno

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake 1894 South Calabria earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	16 November 1894, 5:52 pm local time
Location	Calabria Italy
Coordinates	38.366526, 15.849473
Impacted Areas	Primarily the Piana di Gioia Tauro, the Aspromonte area, and the Tyrrhenian coast of Reggio Calabria province; felt in Messina, Sicily, and as far as Naples. The area affected by the earthquake included densely inhabited rural settlements and small towns such as Palmi, Bagnara Calabra, Seminara, and Santa Eufemia d'Aspromonte.
Seismic Fault	Serre-Aspromonte Fault System
Magnitude	6.1 Richter magnitude; macroseismic Intensity: IX MCS (Mercalli-Cancani-Sieberg scale) in the epicentral area.

Tectonic Earthquake

The seismogenic faults of southern Calabria represent the southern continuation of the NW–SE-trending late Pliocene-Quaternary Intra-Apennines extensional belt. Along the Apennines, this belt dislocates the Meso-Cenozoic terrains of carbonate platform terrains and/or a pelagic multilayer; in Calabria, it dissects uplifted crystalline basement rocks (Serre and Aspromonte Mountain ranges) and bounds major Plio- Pleistocene basins on the eastern side (Mesima, Gioia Tauro, and Reggio Calabria). The extensional fault system of southern Calabria continues southward across the Peloritani mountains of NE Sicily. Northward, it is transversally bound by the SSW-dipping Lamezia-Catanzaro Fault System (Andreacci et al. 2).

Anthropization Level

Towns

In Monteleone, the overall construction quality is modest: buildings are typically made of granite blocks or bricks bonded with mortar and sand, often with a clay content. Many structures follow the shack system proposed by Vivenzio after the 1783 earthquake. Some of these shacks were rebuilt solidly after that quake and still bear the name, even though they resemble ordinary houses or even palaces in appearance. Notable examples include the two-story residence of the Marquis Taccolli, the former palace of the Duke of Monteleone (now rented out), and the grand residence of the Marquis Francia, among others. In general, timber is often integrated into the masonry of buildings, though this compromises structural homogeneity and solidity (Riccò 6).

- Villages
- Public Buildings

Social Impacts

Deaths

Injuries

Destruction Of Dwellings

(Riccò 1897; CFTI5Med; Galli et al. 2023)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

Earthquake 1908 Messina Earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	28 December 1908, 04:20:27 am local time
Location	Sicily and South Calabria Italy
Coordinates	38.152512, 15.671139
Impacted Areas	Messina and Reggio Calabria
Seismic Fault	Messina -Taormina Fault
Magnitude	MCS XI, Mw 7.24 (Comerci et al.)

Typology

Tectonic Earthquake

Ecological Impacts

Tsunami

A tsunami struck both shores of the Strait. First, the sea retreated from the shoreline, then surged inland with a series of powerful waves. The tsunami dramatically worsened the destruction already caused by the earthquake and claimed even more lives—many of them among those who had survived the initial collapse and were running toward the coast in search of safety (National Civil Protection Service; Gambardella).

Social Impacts

Deaths

The death toll was enormous—though uncertain—with recent studies estimating around 80,000 victims (National Civil Protection Service; Gambardella).

Injuries

Destruction Of Goods/Commodities

Destruction Of Dwellings

The earthquake almost completely destroyed the urban fabric of the city of Messina and caused severe damage over an area of approximately 6,000 square kilometers. Just a few minutes later, a tsunami hit both sides of the Strait [...] Homes, public buildings, and places of worship: every structure was either heavily damaged or completely destroyed. Across the provinces of Messina, Reggio Calabria, and Catanzaro (which at the time also included what is now the province of Vibo Valentia), over 40,000 houses were destroyed, 33,000 were rendered uninhabitable, and 68,000 sustained significant damage (National Civil Protection Service; Gambardella).

Destruction Of Public Buildings

The earthquake almost completely destroyed the urban fabric of the city of Messina and caused severe damage over an area of approximately 6,000 square kilometers. Just a few minutes later, a tsunami hit both sides of the Strait [...] Homes, public buildings, and places of worship: every structure was either heavily damaged or completely destroyed (National Civil Protection Service; Gambardella).

Social Disruption

Destruction Of Facilities

Among the effects triggered by the earthquake, one of the most significant was the widespread—often total—destruction of factories and industrial facilities (National Civil Protection Service; Gambardella).

Poverty

At the local level, however, the consequences were mostly felt in the form of economic stagnation and underdevelopment—issues that had already affected the region before the disaster (National Civil Protection Service; Gambardella).

Earthquake 1894 South Calabria earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	16 November 1894
Location	South Calabria Italy
Impacted Areas	Reggio Calabria
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Cities
Social Impacts	DeathsInjuriesSocial DisruptionTrauma

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Professor Terremoto
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	Italy
Nationality	Italian

Reactions

Escape

Intervention

Cooperation

Solidarity

Heroism

Empathy

NameThe Old Woman Of The Boarding House

AgeOld

GenderFemale

NationalityItalian

Reactions

Escape

Disorder

Hindrance

Self-Absorption

Panic

Rage

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

NameThe Widow Of The Boarding House

AgeAdult

GenderFemale

NationalityItalian

Reactions

Loss Of Consciousness

NameThe Old Paralytic Of The Boarding House

AgeOld

GenderMale

NationalityItalian

Reactions

Immobility

Paralysis

Passiveness

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

NameChildren

Reactions

Immobility

Paralysis

Terror

Passiveness

Earthquake 1908 Messina earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time28 December 1908

LocationSicily and South Calabria Italy

Impacted AreasMessina and Reggio Calabria

Emphasis PhaseDisaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)

Seismic Risk Ref.Without reference

Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Cities Towns Villages Houses
Social Impacts	Deaths Injuries Destruction Of Dwellings Recovery

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	Intervention Cooperation Solidarity Heroism

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	"Catastrofe" / "Catastrophe" (58); "Rovina" / "Ruin" (58); "Salvataggi Quasi Prodigiosi" / "Almost Prodigious Rescues" (58); "Mirabili Eroismi" / "Admirable Heroism" (58); "Earthquake" / "Terremoto" (65); "Terror" / "Terrorre" (65, My Translation)
Similes	"I tetti si aprivano e si richiudevano, come fanno le palpebre" 'the roofs was opening and closing like eyelids' (Pirandello 65; my trans.)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus Locus Amoenus Ruins Panicked Mob
Syntax	Parataxis, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language
Punctuation	Multiple Colons, Multiple Stops
Morphology	High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Luigi Pirandello's novella *Il professor Terremoto* (*Professor Earthquake*), which was published in 1910 in the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* and subsequently included in the collection *L'uomo solo* (1922), questions the glorification of heroic acts by showing how they can lead to personal tragedy rather than honor or reward.

At the beginning of the story, a train rides across the area hit by the 1908 Messina earthquake while its passengers exchange stories of heroic gestures related to the disaster. In the opening paragraph, the narrator describes the state of devastation that follows the earthquake: "dopo la catastrofe, cominciava a scoprirsi, tra il verde lussureggiante dei boschi d'aranci e di limoni e il dolce azzurro del mare, la vista atroce dei primi borghi in rovina, gli squarci e lo sconquasso delle case" 'after the catastrophe, the atrocious sight of the first villages in ruin, the gashes and the devastation of the houses were beginning to show, between the lush green of the orange and lemon groves and the pleasant blue of the sea' (Pirandello 58; my trans.). Some young passengers begin to speak loudly of heroic acts and miraculous rescues carried out during the earthquake. An elderly university professor, sitting in the same compartment, listens attentively to their conversation, exclaiming "Disagraziato!" 'Unlucky man!' (58; my trans.) every time a hero or heroine is mentioned in their accounts. The sight of the ruined landscape, along with the tales of dramatic rescues, evokes in him the memory of another

earthquake occurred fifteen years before the time of the narration. The reference is almost certainly to the earthquake of November 16, 1894, in southern Calabria. The *novella* therefore unfolds on two distinct time levels: the first is that of the train journey, which serves as the narrative frame within which the second level – the elderly man's recollection of the 1894 earthquake – is inserted.

When questioned by the other passengers about the reasons for his indignation and abrupt reaction, the professor recounts that he too, many years earlier, was the protagonist of a heroic rescue during a terrible earthquake. At the time, he saved an entire family composed by a widow, her two children, and her old parents. Despite the praise he received for his courageous act, his life has never been the same since that moment, turning into a "terremoto perpetuo" 'endless earthquake' (68; my trans.). Indeed, the professor married the widow, the couple had five children of their own, and he has had to struggle to support this extended family. In this context, his mother-in-law has repeatedly blamed him for the injuries she received while she was trying to escape the catastrophe. Furthermore, he has been sharply criticized by his superiors, who have accused him of not being able to fulfil his responsibilities, while some journalists blamed him for his cynicism and defeatism in local newspapers. In the novella, the life of Pirandello's hero is marked by misery, loneliness, and complete indifference from the surrounding world. While the comic is an immediate perception of contradiction, namely of the clash between what we expect and what actually happens (Calitti 265), humor is the *feeling* of contradiction – something that arises in a reflective context, representing a response mediated by reason. Applying this principle to the context of the *novella*, it is notable how the professor's first appearance on the train, and his bizarre reactions to the passengers' stories, create an initial comic impression – an early warning of contradiction. As the narrative unfolds, that first impression gives way to a more rational reflection on the protagonist's traumatic experience, and the initial comic effect turns into *humor* in the Pirandellian sense.

The 1894 earthquake that struck southern Calabria and eastern Sicily received little attention in the literature of the time, probably because it was overshadowed by the far more devastating 1908 Messina earthquake (with 100,000 victims in Calabria alone, compared to the 96 in 1894), which left a more vivid impression on the literary and collective imagination. Except for contemporary journalistic reports, scientific and technical articles (for example Mercalli and Riccò's), Pirandello appears to be the first author who made the 1894 seismic event the object of an ironic reflection on trauma, and on the detrimental effects of heroic gestures.

The 1894 earthquake (Mw 6.1) was caused by the movement along the normal faults within the Serre-Aspromonte system, attributable to the extensional tectonics of the southern Apennines. It struck southern Calabria and eastern Sicily, producing destructive effects across an area of approximately 80 km² between the Aspromonte plains and the Tyrrhenian coast. The towns of San Procopio and Sant'Eufemia d'Aspromonte were the most heavily damaged, experiencing total or near-total collapse of many buildings. In seventeen other localities within the province of Reggio Calabria (including Bagnara Calabria, Palmi, and Seminara), the number of structural collapses was lower, but significant structural damages were still reported. Two light foreshocks occurred in the afternoon, followed by numerous aftershocks that continued until 16th June of the following year. The earthquake resulted in a total of 96 fatalities (Andreacci et al. 16). In Palmi, shortly after the third tremor, which occurred around 6:00 p.m. local time, the population left their homes and decided to take the statue of the Madonna del Carmine out in a procession. When the main shock struck, around 6:50 p.m., most of Palmi's inhabitants were participating in this improvised procession. This event is still known today as the "Miracolo della Madonna del Carmine di Palmi" (The Miracle of the Madonna del Carmine di Palmi). The fact that nearly the entire population was outdoors at the time of the earthquake, due to the procession, left Palmi virtually unscathed. Only 8 or 9 people lost their lives, and another 300 were injured (out of approximately 11,000 residents), most of them due to falling cornices, chimneys, and other building elements onto the crowded streets. The earthquake caused a total of about one hundred deaths (48 of which occurred in San Procopio alone, largely due to the collapse of the Chiesa dell'Addolorata), while the number of injured was between 800 and 1,000 (INGVterremoti).

It cannot be stated with certainty whether Pirandello personally witnessed the earthquake described in the *novella*. We know from his biography that in 1894 he married Maria Antonietta Portulano—the daughter of a business associate of his father—in his hometown of Girgenti (now Agrigento), and subsequently settled permanently in Rome with his wife. However, even after his relocation, the

writer maintained close personal and familial ties with Sicily, making it plausible that he may have drawn upon direct testimonies or later accounts of the earthquake.

In *Il Professor Terremoto*, the material and social dimension of the seismic disaster is just mentioned. After a sketch of the villages struck by the catastrophe, with the houses torn apart and shattered by the earthquake, the first-person narrator reports his fellow travelers' complain about "l'opera lenta dello sgombero delle macerie" 'the slow removal of rubble' (58; my trans.). Considering the continuation of the story, and going back to the incipit, it is as if this slow process observed by the travelers mirrored the slow social and moral healing of the protagonist. Then, the narrator focuses on is the passengers' stories, their "racconti di orribili casi e di salvataggi quasi prodigiosi e di mirabili eroismi" 'accounts of horrible cases, almost prodigious rescues and admirable heroic acts' (58; my trans.), introducing the main theme of the novella.

Il professor Terremoto mentions two earthquakes occurred in the same region (between southern Calabria and eastern Sicily) over a period of about fifteen years, one of moderate and one of massive magnitude. This region is also in reality a high seismic risk zone, as confirmed by nowadays scientific sources. According to the Regional Civil Defense, Calabria presents a very high seismic hazard (due to the frequency and intensity of historically recorded events), extremely high vulnerability (due to the fragility of the region's building stock, infrastructure, industry, productive systems, and services), and very high exposure (owing to population density and the presence of historical, artistic, and monumental heritage in areas traversed by active faults). Calabria is therefore classified as a region exposed to high seismic in terms of expected casualties, structural damage, and both direct and indirect economic costs in case of a major earthquake (Protezione Civile Regione Calabria).

In 1894, people living in Calabria were aware of the seismic risk in the region and had already adopted some preventive measures. Anyway, escape and rescue strategies were strongly affected by wealth and social status. For example, Riccò observes that "molte famiglie agiate in Monteleone hanno una baracca, che chiamano magazzino, ed usano ordinariamente come tale, e serve di rifugio in caso di terremoti" 'many wealthy families in Monteleone own a shack, used as a warehouse, as they call it, in which they take refuge in case of earthquake' (Riccò 18; my trans.). In Professor Terremoto's first-person account of the 1894 earthquake, people appear to be markedly unprepared in the face of seismic risk; his pragmatic heroism is a key factor in the rescue of human lives in the middle of the night.

In a seismological report from the town of Radicena, a witness referred to minor foreshocks occurring between 6:00 a.m. and noon on 16th November (Riccò 35); the most frightening shock occurred around 6:50 p.m. and was perceived much more intensely than the preceding ones: doorbells rang nonstop, and the electric lights in both private homes and public buildings flashed three times; at 11.30 pm there was a shock whose noise was "come rullo di tamburo" 'like a rolling drum' (36; my trans.), while on 17th November, at 1.50 am, there was a roar "simile al suono della *brogna*, grande conchiglia con cui alla sera i mandriani chiamano i porci" 'like the sound of *brogna*, a large shell that herdsmen blow in the evening to call the pigs' (Riccò 36, emphasis in original; my trans.).

In the novella, the trembling of the earth is depicted in all its physicality, accompanied by the personification of inanimate objects affected by the quake: the houses "traballarono bene" 'shook a lot' (Pirandello 65; my trans.); the roofs opened and closed "come palpebre" 'like eyelids' (65; my trans.); the moon illuminated "la danza di tutte le case della città" 'the dance of all the houses in the town' (65; my trans.).

When the earthquake strikes, Professor Terremoto is gripped by terror, yet he does not allow fear to paralyze him. Survival instinct and altruism prevail, pushing him to heroically risk his life to save the other people in the house: "E ne salvai cinque, mentre le scosse seguitavano a breve distanza l'una dall'altra, scrollando e minacciando di scardinare la ringhiera del balcone a cui ci fidavamo" 'And I saved five of them, while the tremors continued at short intervals one after the other, shaking and threatening to tear away the railing of the balcony we were holding on to' (66; my trans.). The old woman living in the house, by contrast, succumbs to panic and rage – she screams, tears her hair out, and curses everyone else – demanding egoistically to be rescued before the other members of the family. Her irrational behaviour results in an injury to her thighbone.

In his *novella*, Pirandello implicitly draws a parallel between the devastation caused by a seismic event and the inner turmoil of the protagonist, whose heroism ironically backfires on him. Professor Terremoto's former identity has been obliterated by the earthquake, which caused a sudden change of roles, circumstances and relationships within his social circle. The narrator does not reveal the real name of the professor. The tragic event that changed his life has become an attribute of his character.

From a lexical point of view, there is a notable recurrence of words related to the emotional impact of the disaster: "terrore" 'terror' (65; my trans.); "strilli" 'screams' (65; my trans.); "catastrofe" 'catastrophe' (58; my trans.); "rovina" 'ruin' (58; my trans.). On a rhetorical level, Pirandello uses personification to give life to inanimate objects and create an atmosphere where everything is shaken to its very foundation, including individual fates. The houses, symbols of domesticity, kinship, and identity, are involved in a dreadful performance that reflects their tenants' helplessness in the face of the destructive force of nature: "[...] potei vedere in cielo la luna, una magnifica luna, che guardava placidissima nella notte la danza di tutte le case della città" '[...] I could see in the sky the moon, a magnificent moon, gazing with utmost calm in the night at the dance of all the houses in the city' (65; my trans.). Stylistically, the prose is marked by a predominantly paratactic and fragmented syntax, with frequent use of oral markers, ellipses, repetitions, and short phrases that reflect emotional shock and identity crisis, as emerges in the following excerpts: "balzai subito dal terrore, che dapprima m'invase, eroe, eroe" 'I jumped up immediately, from the terror that had first invaded me, hero, hero' (65; my trans.); "Quel terremoto è passato; anche quest'altro è passato: terremoto perpetuo è rimasta la vita mia" 'That earthquake is over; this other one is over too: my life remained a perpetual earthquake' (68; my trans.).

In *Il professor Terremoto*, Pirandello masterfully uses the backdrop of seismic disaster to explore and dismantle conventional notions of heroism and fate. By intertwining natural catastrophe with personal turmoil, he reveals the absurdity and fragility of the human condition, where even noble acts can lead to ruin and turn a life into a "perpetual earthquake" from which there is no true recovery.

Bibliography

Pirandello, Luigi. "Il professor Terremoto." *Novelle per un anno*. Vol. IV, *L'uomo solo*, Mondadori, 1955.

Amato, Alessandro. "I terremoti del '900: la catastrofe sismica del 28 dicembre 1908." *INGVterremoti*, 28 Dec. 2015, <https://ingvterremoti.com/2015/12/28/i-terremoti-del-900-la-catastrofe-sismica-del-28-dicembre-1908/>. Accessed 16 Jul. 2025.

Andrenacci, Carlo, et al. "Reappraisal and Analysis of Macroseismic Data for Seismotectonic Purposes: The Strong Earthquakes of Southern Calabria, Italy." *Geosciences*, vol. 13, no. 7, 2023, article 212. <https://doi.org/10.3390/geosciences13070212>. Accessed 16 July 2025.

Calitti, Floriana. *La vita dei testi. Percorso della narrativa del Novecento*. Zanichelli, 2015, pp. 266-268.

Gambardella, Carmelo. *Ricostruzione post-sisma Messina 1908: La città che visse due volte*. Teknoring, Apr. 2020, <https://www.teknoring.com/wp-content/uploads/uploads/pdf/2020/04/news/urbanistica/ricostruzione-post-sisma-messina-1908-la-citta-che-visse-due-volte.pdf>. Accessed 16 Jul. 2025.

Mercalli, Giuseppe. *I terremoti della Calabria meridionale e del messinese. Monografia sismica regionale*. Accademia Nazionale delle Scienze detta dei XL, 1897. https://storing.ingv.it/cfti/cfti5/pdf_T/003002-680030_T.pdf. Accessed 16 July 2025.

Protezione Civile Regione Calabria. "Il rischio sismico." *Protezione Civile Regione Calabria*. https://www.protezionecivilecalabria.it/?page_id=290. Accessed 16 July 2025.

Protezione Civile. *Il terremoto calabro-messinese del 28 dicembre 1908: un evento catastrofico e un banco di prova per l'Italia unita*. Dipartimento della Protezione Civile, <https://servizio-nazionale.protezionecivile.gov.it/static/041316488bb4a7fdccb230dfdee0d544/terrem-calabro-messinese.pdf>. Accessed 16 Jul. 2025

Riccò, Annibale. *Il terremoto del 16 novembre 1894 in Calabria e Sicilia. Parte I: Relazione sismologica*. *Annali dell'Ufficio Centrale Meteorologico e Geodinamico Italiano*, ser. 2, vol. 19, parte I, 1907, pp. 7-261.

“I terremoti nella STORIA: Memoria condivisa, tradizioni popolari e il terremoto del 16 novembre 1894 nella Calabria meridionale.” *INGVterremoti*, 1 Dec. 2014. <https://ingvterremoti.com/2014/12/01/i-terremoti-nella-storia-memoria-condivisa-tradizioni-popolari-e-il-terremoto-del-16-novembre-1894-nella-calabria-meridionale/>. Accessed 16 July 2025.

Created: 2025-08-04 | Last Updated: 2025-11-24