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**Recommended Citation**


Available at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol26/iss1/4](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol26/iss1/4)

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Self-consciousness and Alienation in Pirandello's *One, No one, and One Hundred Thousand*
Many scholars consider modernism to be a broad artistic and literary movement that reflects a crisis in the representation of reality through art. The artists capture in the temper of times the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. The values and certainties that shaped past centuries no longer seem to be suitable for understanding the events that distinguished the twentieth century. The security of human consciousness, which with its reason was believed to give order and meaning to the world, seems to rapidly collapse.

This existential collapse represents the intimate reflection of what, universally, is happening in the outside world. Technological innovations and the outbreak of World War I and II have produced a radical reevaluation of Western culture’s foundations. Modern cities become a sinister...

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1 The translations of Pirandello from Italian are my own.
place and an environment hostile to men. Cities change in appearance and become places “Where all is fake and mechanical […], an artificial, distorted world, […], a word of fiction, and vanity” (Pirandello 56). This distance between man and his environment creates a gap between needs and opportunities, between dreams and reality. It is within this context that Pirandello’s work comes to life. The problem of identity, so dear to the Italian writer, develops from the awareness that history is at a turning point. The modern subject experiences a deep sense of emptiness due to the sudden collapse of a traditional source of value. Men and women are thus left to themselves without any external reference that could provide for their integrity. As Luca Somigli points out, “[t]he tragic-comic—that is, humorous—condition of the modern subject lies precisely in his inability to live fully his passions and desires, as he is haunted by the awareness that there are no outside agents to endow his actions with meaning” (85). And, according to Anthony Caputi, “[w]ith the loss of traditional structures was also lost not only the building blocks of moral system and purpose, but the means by which individuals defined themselves and what they are about in the world” (63).

For the protagonist of Pirandello’s One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand, the search for an authentic identity represents the meaning of Vitangelo Moscarda’s life. By failing to recognize his identity through the environment he belongs to, Moscarda experiences a sense of alienation toward himself and his environment, the city of Richieri. Because of the absence of any external categories of meaning, Moscarda’s consciousness represents his last chance to give shape and meaning to his character and consequently to his existence. However, Pirandello shows how conscious-
ness, while it may be all we have left, is itself at stake and does not represent a valuable source of knowledge and meaning. In this novel, Pirandello, through Moscarda’s descent into madness, addresses how self-consciousness produces a gap between our self-identity and our outer or social identity. This gap represents the primary cause of our alienation.

The crisis of personality that permeates the novel stems from the difference between Moscarda’s self-perception and the one his acquaintances have of him. This difference generates what we previously referred to as a deep sense of alienation and disorientation which also characterize, on a bigger scale, modernity as a whole. The novel opens with Moscarda’s wife Dida’s comments on his nose, which mark the beginning of the protagonist’s alienation. She points out to her husband that his nose “bends.” Shortly after this declaration, Dida continues by adding that other parts of Moscarda’s body show some imperfections as well. These innocent considerations take Moscarda by surprise. The protagonist begins to question his own knowledge of himself: “I didn’t even know well my own body, the things that most intimately belonged to me: nose, ears, hands, legs” (Pirandello 10-11). Moscarda’s alienation starts within himself. The protagonist feels like a stranger to himself, as suggested by the expression “I didn’t even know well my own body” (10). Moscarda’s alienation further develops as an introspective event, symbolized by the mirror. In looking at his reflection in the mirror, Moscarda apprehends that many different Moscardas inhabit his body without his knowledge. From this introspective phenomenon begins his project of establishing a more authentic self. This experiment brings Moscarda to take refuge in a mental asylum immersed in nature, far away
from the social environment that shaped his existence. Throughout this project, Moscarda understands that there exists a gap between our self-identity and our outer or social identity. This gap represents the primary cause of our alienation. For the sake of existing within a social environment human beings freeze their identity into a form so that a clear and defined personality can be established. Consequently, Pirandello shows that the way we see ourselves differs from the way people see us from the outside. Having a self-conception implies the possibility of seeing the difference between our inner and social self. At the end of the novel, this difference dissolves. By ceasing to be the Moscarda he was within his social environment, the protagonist develops a connection/dialogue with that openness of being that Pirandello refers to as life. Within this new and more open state of consciousness, Pirandello’s identity is free to remain fluid and not bounded into a rigid and static form.

The primary reason for Moscarda’s estrangement from his character lies in the gap between his idea of himself and his acquaintances’ idea of him. Moscarda points out that his self-identity does not coincide with his social identity. Enrico Garzilli asks his readers a key question in relation to Pirandello’s work: “Which is the true reality of the person? Is it the sum total of the judgements of others or does it have a constant and fixed reality?” (84). Moscarda becomes aware that his identity is the result of a *negotiation* between his self-perception and what his acquaintances think of him. Consequently, Moscarda recognizes the limits of self-consciousness in establishing a constant, fixed, and universal identity.

In light of these considerations, we can conclude how Moscarda’s
body turns out to be an entity socially manipulable and less personal than he thought. In other words, we can affirm how, according to Pirandello, unity and solidity are not categories of human identity. Pirandello suggests our identity is the result of the encounter between the perception we have of ourself and the perception others have of us. Moscarda feels trapped in a body that does not fully belong to him: “Lastly, that body in itself was so much a nothing and a nobody, that a wisp of hair could make it sneeze, today, and carry it away tomorrow” (Pirandello 34). Moscarda becomes aware of the influence that others possess in shaping his identity. Pirandello implies that, in society, we are not who we think we are. Many Is inhabit our body. The number of different Is amount to the number of people who know us and possess an opinion about us. The discovery of this truth implies the recognition of an I who is a stranger to Moscarda but also socially real. This gap between these two different levels of perception (individual and social) represents the cause of Moscarda’s alienation.

To break this gap down, Moscarda undertakes a process of discovery and then annihilation of his social identities. This process originates after Moscarda, in looking at his reflection in the mirror, fails to see how his acquaintances might see him from the outside. In the chapter “Pursuit of the Outsider,” Moscarda tries, while looking at his reflection in the mirror, to catch himself in natural actions with the attempt to see himself with the eyes of a stranger. At the end of the experiment, Moscarda asks himself: “How could I remain eternally condemned to carrying him with me, inside me, visible to others and at the same time beyond my vision?” (Pirandello 25). This “pursuit” results in Moscarda’s awareness of the exist-
ence of a stranger who lives within his body and who he is not able to see. Ann Hallamore Caesar notes how, “by rejecting his mirror image, Vitangelo has taken his first step in shedding all those aspects of life that contain, fix, freeze, and define each and every one of us” (147). Observing his image reflected in the mirror, Moscarda is unable to assert a fixed identity that can define him socially. Moscarda later points out how “That, just as I took this body of mine to be the person I wanted and felt to be, so it could be taken by someone else who would give it a reality in his own fashion” (Pirandello 34). Moscarda’s acquaintances all see him differently and thus have all assigned him a different identity based on their idea of him. It is through an introspective act, symbolized by the mirror, that Vitangelo Moscarda’s alienation develops. Moscarda becomes aware that his social identity is as real as his self-identity. Moscarda internalizes and accepts this truth; nevertheless, he admits the impossibility of knowing how his acquaintances see him from the outside. Moscarda needs to be aware of what the people of Richieri think about him. Only after this first step toward a wider awareness of Moscarda’s acquaintances’ perception of his personality will the protagonist have the chance to destroy it and bridge the gap previously mentioned.

Moscarda’s character is shaped significantly by the random circumstances in which he finds himself living, in particular the setting and Vitangelo’s family name. His father, Francesco Antonio Moscarda, owned a bank in Richieri. He was recognized by the inhabitants of Richieri as a terrible usurer. Vitangelo inherited the fortune left by his father, which also includes bank ownership. He has therefore unintentionally inherited the title of usurer assigned to his father. Because of that, he is regarded by all citizens with
contempt. Among the people hostile towards Vitangelo, there is Mr. Marco di Dio, who becomes a victim of Vitangelo’s project.

Marco di Dio feels a deep hatred toward Vitangelo. Di Dio and his wife have fallen into absolute poverty because of the many debts accumulated over the years with the bank of Francesco Antonio Moscarda. The latter repeatedly subsidized di Dio, who at the time was a failed artist and entrepreneur. Di Dio feels a strong hatred toward Vitangelo, being the son of the man who ruined his life. Moscarda takes this opportunity to shatter one of the many Vitangelos that inhabit him with the aim of finally dissolving the gap between self and social identity.

Moscarda decides to act irrationally, against what would be the intentions of an usurer. He decides to liquidate the bank, evict Marco di Dio and his wife, and then surprise them with a new house and ten thousand lire to invest in a new art studio. This irrational act results in the label of fool attributed to Moscarda by the citizens of Richieri. Although Moscarda seems to have managed to destroy the image of the usurer, he is now considered a fool by the entire town. Moreover, Moscarda’s unreasonable act will threaten his relationship with Dida.

Vitangelo soon learns Dida’s idea about him. Dida considers her husband a childish, foolish, and inept individual whose nickname is Gengè: “Gengè had a reality for my wife Dida. Nevertheless, I couldn’t consider that a consolation in any way, because I assure you, it would be hard to imagine a creature more foolish than this Gengè so dear to my wife” (Pirandello 63). Gengè represents the identity Dida assigned Moscarda and through which Dida interprets his behavior. Consequently, Dida judges Vitangelo’s act
toward di Dio as an innocent and stupid joke put together by her child-

ish husband. After having discovered that di Dio considers him a usurer
because of his father’s past, Moscarda learns that for his wife he is a naïve
man with little intelligence. Moscarda recognizes this identity as socially
real but refuses it. Vitangelo then decides to break off his relationship with
Dida and leaves the house where he and his wife lived together. Moscarda’s
alienation reaches a peak. He feels now not only a stranger within his own
body but also to the society which conferred on him the different personali-
ties he recognized as socially real. By refusing the label of usurer and inept,
Moscarda irreparably distances himself from society. In this way, Pirandello
shows that the reason for human beings’ alienation must be found in the


insurmountable distance between our self-conception and others’ judgment


about us. This conflict exists because human beings possess an introspective


faculty. We can think about ourselves and thus have an idea about who we


think we are.


Freezing identity into a form means defining ourselves. Defining


ourselves means to be through a limited set of qualities which define our


identity. Having a fixed and rigid self-identity and a fixed and rigid opin-


ion of others increases the distance between our self and social identity.
Pirandello argues that having a clear and fixed sense of ourself is a mystifica-


tion of the concept of identity. We are not but can eternally be. Within the


Pirandellian context, to be means to exist statically. Accordingly, we are not


but can be. Pirandello address this concept in chapter VII of book three: “A


parenthesis necessary for all,” Moscarda affirms:


We performed an act. We believe in good faith the entirety of our
identity to be in that act. We realize unfortunately that this is not so, and that the act, on the contrary, is always and only performed by one of the many individuals we are or can be […]. [W]e realize, I mean, that we are not fully in that act, and therefore it would be a horrible injustice to judge us from that alone (Pirandello 87, emphasis mine).

Human beings are thus a possibility. This means that in defining ourselves within a limited set of qualities we deny identity its nature. Our identity does not constitute a fixed, predetermined set of qualities but represents an openness.

Moscarda addresses this openness by recognizing that nature, unlike man, lacks a sense of inner identity and thus there is no conflict with a social identity. As he expresses it toward the end of the novel: “But we also attribute this peace to the earth and the plants, which seems to live only for the sake of living, only in this stupidity they can live” (Pirandello 53, emphasis mine). With the term “stupidity,” Pirandello grasps the state of innocence and lack of self-awareness which allows nature to live peacefully: “Ah, to get rid of your consciousness, like a stone, like a tree! Not to even remember your own name anymore” (Pirandello 54). Nature can exist peacefully because, for instance, a rock or a tree does not know that it is called a rock or tree.

It is no coincidence that Moscarda refers to names. The name represents the sum of the set of qualities through which we define ourselves in society. Commenting on Adriano Tilgher’s thesis, according to which Pirandello affirms that life must take on a form, Somigli points out how “in
this sense, identity is nothing more than the construction and fixation of an image of the self by isolating certain elements from the flow of existence” (85). Recognizing that “in abstract, we cannot just be” (Pirandello 85), man must freeze identity into a form if he wants to exist within a social environment. This form is represented by the name. We attribute to our name a rigid set of qualities which define us. If we want to exist in society, our self-identity must be fixed and static. Nevertheless, having a clear sense of inner identity represents the primary cause of the conflict between self and social identity. This conflict generates alienation.

Consequently, without a name there is no self-identity, and without self-identity there is no conflict. The absence of the contrast between the two constitutes the resolution to the problem of alienation. Moscarda affirms that “without the name we don’t have the concept, and the thing remains in us as if blind, indistinct and undefined” (Pirandello 223). Without the name, the essence of our self-identity, the latter remains “indistinct and undefined,” and thus open. In this openness we can authentically be. Immersed in nature, Moscarda loses his self-identity because he is detached from the environment where the name “Vitangelo Moscarda” assumes its meaning. For this reason, Gregory Lucente can affirm that “[Moscarda’s] entire project—when carried out within society—is in practical terms an utter failure” (27). But once away from the social environment where the name Vitangelo Moscarda has meaning, the protagonist can experience the openness that allows him to break down the gap between self and social identity and finally become one.

In nature, Moscarda experiences the fluidity lacking in a social
environment. Fiora A. Bassanese points out that “if the city is a ‘constructed world’, nature offers infinite fluidity and mutability” (67). Within this fluidity and mutability, Moscarda’s identity undergoes a constant rebirth: “Because I die at every instant, I am reborn new and without memories: alive and complete, no longer inside myself, but in everything outside” (Pirandello 225). Moscarda has lost his rigid, fixed self-identity, and the name “Vitangelo Moscarda” no longer has a fixed and defined meaning. Moreover, away from society, there are no external points of reference that can confirm or deny the essence of Moscarda’s identity. This can happen also because Moscarda now lives in a place “that lives for itself, and for you it has no trace or voice” (19). As opposed to a social environment, which is a human construction, nature lives for itself. Because of that, in nature there is no such thing as social identity. Without social identity there cannot be conflict with our self-perception. Robert Dombrowski affirms how “[…] at the novel’s end, when, having taken refuge in a mental asylum, [Moscarda] loses his specific identity in becoming one with nature, thus losing the self that had been endangered by the scrutiny of others, paradoxically avoiding non-being by ceasing to be” (94). By losing his “specific [self-identity]” Moscarda has dissolved the gap between inner and outer identity. His identity cannot be “endangered by the scrutiny of others” because nature has no voice for human beings. The problem of the distance between inner and outer identity is resolved. Having lost its specificity and determinacy, Moscarda’s identity can remain fluid, without being trapped into a form, and is thus free to die and be reborn eternally. He now embraces that openness that, according to Pirandello, represents the primary source for an
authentic life. Being in contact with the constant flux that is life, Moscarda no longer feels slave of his self-consciousness but connected to that openness which allows identity to remain fluid without being trapped into a form.

In society, circumstances exist which shape our identity, and which go beyond our will; nevertheless, they indelibly mark our identity. Di Dio considers Moscarda an usurer merely because his father was one and Vitangelo inherited his bank. Accordingly, these circumstances drive people to have an opinion about us that we do not recognize as accurately and representative of the totality of our identity. Because of that, a gap exists between our self-identity and social identity. This gap exists because, as opposed to nature, we possess an introspective quality which allows us to generate an idea about ourselves and thus to possess a self-perception. The conflict between self and social identity generates alienation. Pirandello shows how we tend to judge people’s words and actions through the fixed and rigid idea we have of them. This is the result of the human tendency to freeze identity into a form. In doing so, we deny identity its fluidity. We enclose ourselves in our misleading consciousness and we consider our rigid and fixed ideas about a person or about ourselves an absolute and undeniable truth. Consequently, we deny ourselves any genuine openness toward the other and ourselves.

At the end of the novel, when Moscarda has taken refuge in a mental asylum immersed in nature, his self-identity slowly dissolves. Moscarda “[merges] in nature […] in the abandonment of self-consciousness to an unthinking, unseeing, unreflecting, unconscious life-form” (Bassanese 67). The name “Vitangelo Moscarda” has no meaning in the unfamiliar environ-
ment Moscarda lives in. Nature, as opposed to humanity, lives for itself and lacks consciousness. By living for itself and not in relation to human beings, in nature there is no danger for Moscarda’s I to be “endangered by the scrutiny of others” (Dombrowski 94). By losing his social identity and because of the absence of an entity that could endanger Moscarda’s self-identity, the gap we described cannot exist. This is the reason Pirandello mentions nature can live peacefully. Nature has no self-consciousness. Without self-consciousness there is no self-identity and without self-identity there is no gap between self and social identity. Without this conflict there is no alienation.

To overcome the problem of alienation within a social environment, Pirandello proposes to rethink our identity and that of others as in constant flux. This is possible only by avoiding defining it, thus, freezing it into a form. By avoiding this process, our identity and that of others would fluctuate in that openness that characterizes life, since life is a continuous flux and man is a possibility. Pirandello invites us to let others be, to live, ourselves, authentically. Our existence in society is dependent on others in that identity is always a negotiation between the perception we have of ourselves and the one others have of us. Therefore, others play a key role in our existence. We are if our identity is confirmed by the society we live in. We exist if someone confirms our existence. Only by authentically opening ourselves to others can we hope to live peacefully in society as one whole and to find the solution to the problem of alienation.

Moscarda’s individual experience sheds light on the general condition of the modern subject and on the relationship between consciousness and truth. Through Moscarda’s identity crisis, Pirandello seems to reject a
type of thought that we could refer to as ideological or closed in itself. As a matter of fact, Moscarda conveys, albeit in his tragic end, a form of thought that, as opposed to the ideological, undergoes a constant renewal and thus it is open to that constant flux that, according to Pirandello, characterizes authentic life. In the sudden dissolution of any solid source of meaning which threatens to systematize reality, Pirandello shows how truth constitutes something irreducible to a well-defined shape or system.
Works Cited


