

TREMA LA NOTTE (THE NIGHT TREMBLES)

Nadia Terranova

Analysis by Silvy Boccaletti

Historical Novel, Social Novel

Nadia Terranova’s 2022 historical novel *Trema la notte* (*The Night Trembles*) deals with the 1908 Messina and Reggio Calabria earthquake, in southern Italy. Centering on the intertwined stories of Nicola, a lonely child, and Barbara, a young Sicilian woman, the novel examines themes of trauma and recovery in the earthquake’s aftermath. The 1908 disaster is not only a destructive force that shatters the characters’ urban and emotional landscapes, but it is also as a catalyst for rebirth.

Year of Publication	2022
Publication Place	Turin
Editor	Einaudi
Entity	Messina and Reggio Calabria earthquake of 1908

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake Messina and Reggio Calabria earthquake of 1908

REAL EVENT

Time	1908
Location	Calabria, Sicilia Italy
Coordinates	38.152512, 15.671139
Impacted Areas	Cities, towns, etc...
Seismic Fault	Messina-Taormina fault (Arco Calabro)
Magnitude	7.1 Richter magnitude
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	Cities Cultural Heritage Sites Religious Buildings And Sites

	Public Buildings And Sites
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes <p>"The beach line of the San Raineri peninsula is eroded by 12-20 metres, with a maximum of 25 metres in the vicinity of the embankment, and is cancelled out at the tip of the peninsula. On the outer side, the convexity of the existing arching between Punta Secca and the lighthouse becomes more pronounced. Overall, the entire peninsula subsides unevenly, with the phenomenon more accentuated towards the centre where the depression reaches 40-50 cm. There is also erosion of the coasts or their submergence, as in the case of the Marina, which has been considerably reduced from its initial width of 33 metres" (Attanasio 43)</p>
Social Impacts	Deaths <p>"A significant fraction of the population, numbering 140,000 at Messina and 45,000 at Reggio Calabria, was reported dead. Assessing the total number of victims has been problematic, as fatality estimates range from 60,000 to over 100,000, yet 1908 was undeniably the deadliest European earthquake ever and one of the deadliest worldwide. Guidoboni et al. [2007] contend that 80,000 people were killed by the earthquake, including as many as 2,000 who died as a result of the tsunami" (Pino et al. 243)</p> Injuries <p>"A significant fraction of the population, numbering 140,000 at Messina and 45,000 at Reggio Calabria, was reported dead. Assessing the total number of victims has been problematic, as fatality estimates range from 60,000 to over 100,000, yet 1908 was undeniably the deadliest European earthquake ever and one of the deadliest worldwide. Guidoboni et al. [2007] contend that 80,000 people were killed by the earthquake, including as many as 2,000 who died as a result of the tsunami" (Pino et al. 243)</p>

Earthquake Messina and Reggio Calabria earthquake of 1908

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1908
Location	Italy
Impacted Areas	Cities, towns. etc.
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropization Level	CitiesReligious Buildings And SitesPublic Buildings And Sites
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes
Social Impacts	DeathsInjuriesDestruction Of Dwellings Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions	
Name	Nicola
Age	Children
Gender	Male
Native Place	Reggio Calabria

Nationality	Italian
Reactions	<div>Fight For Survival</div> <div>Escape</div> <div>Fear</div> <div>Terror</div> <div>Panic</div>

Name	Barbara
Age	Young Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Messina
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	<div>Distrust</div> <div>Sadness</div> <div>Rage</div> <div>Intervention</div> <div>Escape</div>

Name	Madame
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Non-indigenous
Nationality	/
Reactions	<div>Intervention</div> <div>Sadness</div> <div>Despair</div>

Name	Barbara's Grandmother
Age	Old Woman
Gender	Female
Native Place	Messina
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	<div>Prayer</div>

Name	Elvira
Age	Adult
Gender	Female
Native Place	Messina
Nationality	Italian
Reactions	<div>Intervention</div> <div>Sadness</div>

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Humans
Reactions	<div>Despair</div> <div>Unease</div>

Name	Religious people
------	------------------

Reactions	Intervention
Name	The army
Reactions	Intervention
Name	The population
Reactions	Cooperation

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Metaphors	"Reggio Calabria gli crollava addosso" 'Reggio Calabria collapsed on him' (Terranova 39; my trans.) "Uno Scill'e Cariddi insieme, un mostro con sei teste, ciascuna con tre file di denti aguzzi" / "A Scyll and Charybdis together, a monster with six heads, each with three rows of sharp teeth" (Terranova 39; my trans.) "Il fragore maligno gli erose i timpani ed entrò nel suo piccolo corpo" 'The malignant roar eroded his eardrums and entered his small body' (Terranova 39; my trans.) "Sotto il corpo una frolla di cemento" 'Beneath her body, a shortcrust of concrete' (Terranova 45; my trans.) "Le onde che volevano mangiarmi si ritrassero" 'The waves that wanted to devour me drew back' (Terranova 45; my trans.)
Similes	"La cantina ballò come un sommergibile" 'The cellar danced like a submarine' (Terranova 39; my trans.)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Cruel Nature
Syntax	Parataxis, Hypotaxis, Unconventional Position, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language
Punctuation	High Frequency Punctuation Marks
Morphology	High Frequency Passive Forms, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language, High frequency of abstracts, neutral, indefinite forms

Trema la notte (2022) by Nadia Terranova is a historical novel that deals with the lives of two young characters, Barbara and Nicola, in the aftermath of the 1908 Messina earthquake, a disaster that struck Messina and Reggio Calabria in 1908, reducing both cities to rubble in a single night. As the city crumbles and darkness envelops the survivors, the characters navigate loss, trauma, and the collapse of their familiar world. Through poetic language and historical insight, Terranova explores how personal and collective memories emerge from the ruins, revealing the resilience of the human spirit in the face of catastrophe. The novel blends fiction with historical reality, offering a poignant reflection on grief, identity, and rebirth in a context of destruction, social crisis, and emotional turmoil.

According to Pino et al. (243), a substantial portion of the population perished in the 1908 disaster, with reported death tolls of approximately 140,000 in Messina and 45,000 in Reggio Calabria. However, determining the precise number of casualties remains challenging, as estimates vary widely

– from 60,000 to more than 100,000. Despite this uncertainty, the 1908 earthquake is unequivocally recognized as the most lethal seismic event in European history and among the most devastating globally. Around 80,000 individuals lost their lives, including up to 2,000 who succumbed to the ensuing tsunami.

The earthquake had also a detrimental ecological impact. As Attanasio (43) reports, the shoreline of the San Raineri peninsula experienced significant erosion, receding by 12 to 20 metres and reaching a maximum retreat of 25 metres near the embankment. At the peninsula's tip, the shoreline was entirely obliterated. On the seaward side, the curvature between Punta Secca and the lighthouse became increasingly pronounced. The peninsula underwent uneven subsidence, with the central area showing the most severe depression, measuring between 40 and 50 centimetres. Coastal erosion and submersion were also evident, notably at the Marina, where the original width of 33 metres was substantially diminished.

In Terranova's novel, the protagonists Barbara Ruello, a young Sicilian woman, and Nicola Fera, a Calabrian boy, lead separate lives until their paths cross in Messina amidst the chaos following the earthquake. Though they survive the catastrophe, Barbara and Nicola are victims of the social conventions and family constraints that have marked their whole life. Indeed, before the disaster, they both live under oppression and suffering. Barbara, in her twenties, is subject to the tyrannical authority of her father, who makes all decisions for her, including whom she should marry. Intelligent, curious, and passionate about literature, she dreams of empowerment. Nicola, the son of a prestigious Calabrian family producing bergamot perfume, suffers constant abuse from his violent parents. Forced to sleep in a basement, tied with ropes, he has never known the carefree nature of childhood. He longs to escape, but fear and family control paralyze him.

On the night of the earthquake, Barbara is in Messina to stay with her grandmother, while Nicola is tied to his bed in the basement. The quake overwhelms them both, yet they miraculously survive – unlike their families. The disaster causes not only the total destruction of Reggio Calabria and Messina, but it results in immense pain and irreparable loss on a socioemotional level.

In the novel, the earthquake takes on an almost apocalyptic dimension: it is described as "rumore soffocante e assassino" 'suffocating and murderous noise' (Terranova 45; my trans.), "fragore maligno" 'malignant roar' (44; my trans.), "grande boato" 'great roar' (45; my trans.), "eco di tuoni vomitati dall'abisso" 'echo of thunder spewed from the abyss' (51; my trans.), capable of erasing entire houses as if a giant had sat on them, crushing them under its weight.

In the first part, the book focuses on the earthquake's impact on the two cities, exploring the protagonists' immediate reactions. Nicola, terrified, descends into panic and starts crying: "Piangere e urlare furono un tutt'uno" 'Crying and screaming were one' (45; my trans.). Despite his despair, he manages to free himself from the bed his mother had chained him to, while rescuers arrive just in time to save him. Barbara, having escaped the tragedy, immediately searches for her grandmother in the rubble of her building, only to find her dead: "Urlai il suo nome, il suo nome nudo e uguale al mio, come chiamando una me stessa diversa, e corsi a scavare nel punto dove ero certa di sentirla, finché due mani calde non mi cinsero i fianchi e mi tirarono via un attimo prima che una trave cadesse" 'I shouted her name, her name naked and equal to my own, as if calling a different self, and I ran and dug in where I was sure I would hear her, until two warm hands gripped my hips and pulled me away a moment before a beam fell' (52; my trans.). Like Nicola, she is haunted by grief: "Mi stesi, mi rannicchiai su un fianco e piansi, le guance premevano sui ruderi freddi e le lacrime scendevano su quel che restava della mia esistenza, per la rabbia presi a morsi e graffi pezzi di pavimenti e pareti, alzai gli occhi e sopra di me vidi emergere nel fumo brandelli di facciata, finestre aperte sul nulla" 'I lay down, curled up on my side and wept, my cheeks pressed against the cold ruins and tears streamed down over what remained of my existence, out of rage I bit and scratched pieces of floors and walls, I looked up and above me I saw shreds of façade emerge in the smoke, windows open to nothingness' (52; my trans.).

The novel vividly portrays the devastation caused by the earthquake. In Messina and Reggio Calabria, survivors wander the streets, lost, suspended between life and death: "Camminavamo sopra i morti, in mezzo ai morti, ancora senza comprendere fino in fondo che eravamo vivi, incerti se lo fossimo davvero" 'We walked over the dead, among the dead, still unable to truly understand that we were

alive – unsure if we really were' (54; my trans.). Reggio Calabria's destruction is total: homes, churches, and streets are reduced to dust, while the port and beach are unrecognizable. Messina suffers an equally horrific fate: "Messina, un corpo in agonia, sanguinava da finestre fracassate e nonostante l'epistassi non moriva, si ostinava a esistere puzzando di sconcerto e letame" 'Messina, a body in agony, bled from smashed windows and despite the nosebleed did not die, it insisted on existing, reeking of despondency and muck' (52; my trans.).

From the first day following the disaster, local communities, the military, and the Church mobilize to intervene and help the displaced, but it is in the aftermath of the earthquake that the two protagonists experience a second trauma. Nicola and Barbara meet by chance in Messina aboard a navy ship, where Barbara is raped by a sailor – under Nicola's helpless gaze, as he witnesses the horror carried out by a man who, as a rescuer, becomes an oppressor.

In the second part of the novel, Nicola and Barbara begin to rebuild their everyday lives, starting with the creation of new social bonds based on elective affinities and affection. On one hand, the tragedy of the earthquake brought ruin and destruction; on the other, it opened new possibilities for the protagonists – new lives, dreams, and hopes. For Nicola, these are embodied in two new adoptive parents; for Barbara, in a family composed of new female friends who survived the earthquake and an unexpected daughter. The post-earthquake reconstruction becomes an opportunity to experience new forms of connection, solidarity, and love. The protagonists' response to the seismic event unfolds as a process of resilience building, redirecting their previously oppressive and unhappy trajectories into new directions.

From a linguistic perspective, the author employs metaphors and personifications to depict the arrival of the earthquake in Messina and Reggio Calabria. These stylistic devices serve to amplify the sense of anguish and terror, transforming the disaster into something almost supernatural – at once surreal and mythological – through evocative and tension-filled passages.

The earthquake is likened to a mythical sea creature, emphasizing its overwhelming power and unstoppable nature: "Uno Scill'e Cariddi insieme, un mostro con sei teste, ciascuna con tre file di denti aguzzi" 'A Scylla and Charybdis together, a monster with six heads, each with three rows of sharp teeth' (39; my trans.). The destruction caused by the earthquake appears to the inhabitants as the result of a divine whim, a distant and omniscient God impulsively playing with humanity: "Quella notte, Dio si era seduto a un tavolo da gioco, uno dei tanti allestiti per le feste natalizie, aveva vinto e perso, aveva brindato e si era incollerito, aveva buttato giù senza ordine ogni cosa capitata a tiro" 'That night, God sat down at a gambling table – one of the many set up for the Christmas festivities – he won and lost, toasted and raged, and knocked down everything within reach, with no sense of order' (58; my trans.). The literary *topos* of Nemesis is therefore used with sharp irony to reflect on human helplessness in the face of overwhelming natural forces. Personification is frequently used to convey the destructive force of the earthquake, as in the following excerpt: "L'eco di tuoni vomitati dall'abisso" 'The echo of thunder vomited from the abyss' (45; my trans.).

In the novel, the author makes also strategic use of punctuation to build the rhythm and shape the emotional evolution of the story. For example, commas are used to create a cadenced and reflective rhythm in the sentence "Alle cinque e ventuno, a Messina, città mio desiderio e meta, mia origine e scelto destino, capitale e antitesi del paese da cui scappavo, i vivi non esistevano più" 'At five twenty-one, in Messina, my city of desire and destination, my origin and chosen destiny, capital and antithesis of the country from which I was fleeing, the living no longer existed' (45; my trans.).

In general, the author alternates parataxis and hypotaxis to create rhythm and tension, using unconventional constructions to emphasise the drama, and incorporating elements of the spoken language to give authenticity to the narrative voice. The novel is also marked by a predominance of nouns and adjectives that refer to tangible objects and their physical attributes, and are employed to construct powerful and evocative imagery. By contrast, the use of neutral and indefinite forms, such as "Solo i morti e i morti viventi" 'Only the dead and the living dead' (45; my trans.) contributes to creating a universal and symbolic tone, transposing a contingent, local disaster into a reflection on human suffering in a context of crisis. The frequent use of passive forms underscores the experience of a suffered tragedy where human beings face their vulnerability when struck by unpredictable disasters.

In conclusion, *Trema la notte* emerges as a profound and poetic narrative that intertwines historical memory with a symbolic dimension, effectively reconstructing the collective trauma of the 1908 earthquake. Through a richly evocative and image-laden style, Nadia Terranova gives voice to both suffering and renewal, transforming a specific historical catastrophe into a narrative of universal resonance.

Bibliography

Terranova, Nadia. *Trema la notte*. Einaudi, 2022.

Attanasio, Sandro. *28 Dicembre 1908 ore 5, 21: terremoto*. Vol. 4. Bonanno, 1988.

Baratta, Mario. *La catastrofe sismica Calabro messinese (28 dicembre 1908)*. Presso la Società geografica italiana, 1910.

Bertolaso, Guido. *Il Terremoto E Il Maremoto Del 28 Dicembre 1908 Analisi Sismologica, Impatto, Prospettive*. Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia; Storia Geofisica Ambiente, 2008.

Ciuccarelli, Cecilia. "Messina e Reggio Calabria: monumenti perduti." *Il Terremoto E Il Maremoto Del 28 Dicembre 1908 Analisi Sismologica, Impatto, Prospettive*, edited by Guido Bertolaso Guido et al., Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia; Storia Geofisica Ambiente, 2008, pp. 333–392.

Dickie, John. *Una catastrofe patriottica: 1908: il terremoto di Messina*. Gius. Laterza & Figli Spa, 2014.

Pino, Nicola A., et al. "The 28 December 1908 Messina Straits earthquake (Mw 7.1): A great earthquake throughout a century of seismology." *Seismological Research Letters*, vol. 80, no. 2, 2009, pp. 243–259. <https://doi.org/10.1785/gssrl.80.2.243>.