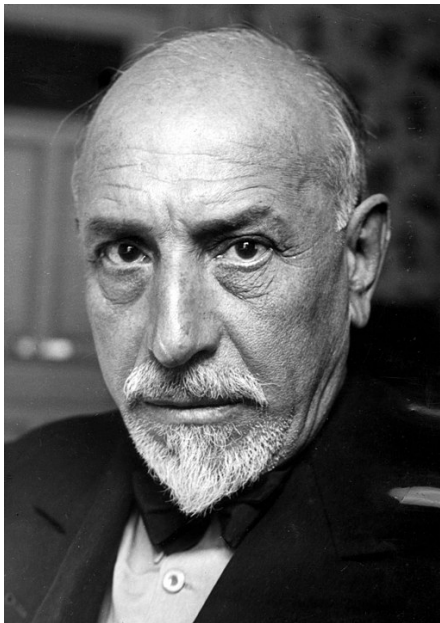


LUIGI PIRANDELLO (1867-1936)

This month's essay deals with another Italian writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature "for his almost magical power to turn psychological analysis into good theatre." (The description of the award by the Nobel Committee). He was a prolific writer, penning several hundred short stories, about 40 plays, and many novels. We can only highlight several important ones in this essay. (Some of his works were written in the Sicilian dialect). As a dramatist, he is credited with having introduced the concept of "theater within the theater" in his 1921 play Sei Personaggi in Cerca d'Autore (Six Characters in Search of an Author), which earned him much acclaim as an innovator in modern drama. His tragic farces are often seen as forerunners of the modern "Theater of the Absurd."



Luigi Pirandello was born into an upper-class family in a farmhouse called *il Caos* (*Chaos* in Italian, but in the Sicilian dialect it means *Trouser*, from the shape of a nearby ravine. Luigi always loved to call himself "the son of Chaos.") The area was near Porto Empedocle, which was a poor town in southern Sicily, in the Girgenti (the Sicilian name for the Province of Agrigento). His father, Stefano, belonged to a wealthy family involved in the sulfur industry, and his mother, Caterina Ricci Gramitto, was also from a well-to-do background, descending from a family of the bourgeois professional class of Agrigento.

Both families, the Pirandello and the Ricci Gramitto, ferociously opposed all monarchy, but especially the Bourbon monarchy that was ruling over them in Sicily. For this reason, they had actively participated in the Risorgimento. Stefano participated in the famous "Expedition of the Thousand," later following Garibaldi all the way to the battle of Aspromonte.

Caterina, at the age of thirteen, was forced to accompany her father to Malta, where he had been sent into exile by the Bourbon monarchy. But the open participation in Garibaldi's cause and the strong sense of idealism of those early years of the Risorgimento were quickly transformed, especially in Caterina, into an angry and bitter disappointment with the new reality created by the unification. Luigi Pirandello would eventually assimilate this sense of betrayal and resentment from his parents and express it in several of his poems and in his 1913 novel *I Vecchi e i Giovani* (*The Old and the Young*). It is also probable that this climate of disillusion inculcated in the young Luigi the sense of disproportion between ideals and reality which is recognizable in his 1908 essay *L'Umorismo* (*On Humor*).

Luigi Pirandello received his elementary education at home; his father expecting him to continue in the family sulfur business. However, Luigi was much more fascinated by the Sicilian fables and legends that their elderly servant Maria Stella recounted to him than he was by anything scholastic or academic. At the insistence of his father, Luigi was registered at a technical school, but eventually switched to the study of the humanities at the gymnasium, something which had always attracted him. (He had already written his first tragedy drama at the age of 12).

In 1880, the Pirandello family moved to Palermo where Luigi completed his high school education. He also began avidly reading 19th-century Italian poets, such as Giosuè Carducci (who would become the first Italian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1906) and Arturo Graf. It was also around this time that he began composing his first poems.

During this period, the first signs of serious differences arose between Luigi and Stefano. Luigi had discovered some notes revealing the existence of his father's extramarital affairs. As a reaction to the ever-increasing distrust and disharmony that he was developing toward Stefano, who was a man of a robust physique and crude manners, Luigi's attachment to his mother continued to grow to the point of profound veneration. This strong feeling toward his mother later expressed itself, after her death in 1915, in the moving pages of his novella *Colloqui coi Personaggi* (Talks with the Characters, 1915).

At this time, Luigi fell in love with his cousin, Lina. Initially, the relationship was frowned upon, but suddenly the affair was taken seriously by Lina's family. They demanded that Luigi leave school and dedicate himself to his father's sulfur business so that he could immediately marry her. In 1886, during a vacation from school, Luigi went to visit the sulfur mines of Porto Empedocle and started working with his father. The experience he gained there would be reflected in his future writings, such as *Il Fumo* (*The Smoke*, 1904), *Ciàula scopre la Luna* (*Ciàula discovers the Moon*, 1907), as well as some of the descriptions and background in the novel *Vecchi e i Giovani* (*The Old and the Young*, 1913).

The marriage to Lina that had seemed imminent was postponed for some reason. Desiring to further his education, Luigi then registered at the University of Palermo in the Departments of Law and of Letters. The campus at Palermo, and above all the Department of Law, was the center in those years of an ultra-right-wing movement that would eventually evolve into the Fasci Siciliani (Sicilian Fascist movement). (Although Pirandello was not an active member of this movement at the time, he did have close ties of friendship with its leading ideologues).

In 1887, having definitely chosen to study in the Department of Letters, he moved to Rome in order to continue his studies. But his first encounter with the city, which was the center of the Risorgimento struggle in which the families of his parents had participated with enthusiasm, was disappointing and nothing close to what he had expected. "When I arrived in Rome it was raining hard, it was night time and I felt like my heart was being crushed, but then I laughed like a man in the throes of desperation." He finally had a chance to see for himself the irreducible decadence of the so-called heroes of the Risorgimento in the person of his uncle Rocco, who was now a greying and exhausted functionary of the government who provided him with temporary lodgings in Rome. The "desperate laugh," as he described his reaction to seeing Rome, was his manifestation of revenge for the disappointment he had undergone. This reaction inspired the bitter verses of his first collection of poems, *Mal Giocondo* (*Badly Playful*, 1889). However, this first visit to Rome wasn't all negative. His stay in Rome provided him with the opportunity to visit the many theaters in the capital: especially Il Nazionale, Il Valle, and Il Manzoni. Experiencing the dramatic theater awakened in him an excitement and a desire to become an important part of this literary medium (which he would eventually achieve).

Following a quarrel with a Professor of Latin, Luigi was forced to leave the University. In 1888, he went to the University of Bonn in Germany. His stay in Bonn, which lasted two years, was very fruitful to his cultural and literary development. He read the German romantics: Ludwig Tieck,

Jean Paul Richter, Adelbert von Chamisso, Heinrich Heine, and Goethe. He began translating the *Roman Elegies* of Goethe, which led to his composition *Elegie Boreali* (Boreal Elegies, 1895), later titled *Elegie Renane* (Rhineland Elegies, 1889-90). These poems were Pirandello's attempt to imitate the style of Goethe's *Roman Elegies*. He also began to study the works of the medieval Sienese poet Francesco "Cecco" Angiolieri on the topic of humorism. In March 1891 he received his doctorate in Romance Philology, writing his dissertation about his native dialect: *The Agrigento Dialect: Sounds and Sound Developments in the Speech of Craperallis*.

After a brief sojourn in Sicily following the completion of his doctoral work, during which the planned marriage with his cousin was finally called off, Luigi returned to Rome. He became good friends with a group of writer-journalists, one of whom, Luigi Capuana, encouraged him to focus on narrative writing. This encouragement led him to write his first important novel—*Marta Ajala* (1893) that was later published as *l'Esclusa* (The Excluded Woman, 1901). Capuana's encouragement also led to the publication of his first collection of short stories, *Amori Senza Amore* (Love Without Love, 1894).

In 1894, at the age of 27, he married a young woman whom he had never met. Like so many other marriages during that period, it had been arranged by his parents according to custom. His bride, Antonietta Portulano, was the daughter of a wealthy sulfur merchant who was a business associate of his father. She was a shy, withdrawn girl from Agrigento, who had been educated at a convent school run by the nuns of San Vincenzo. Her mother had died in childbirth because her father was so insanely jealous that he would not allow a doctor to be present during the birth. The marriage gave Luigi financial independence, allowing him to live in Rome and to write.

The first years of married life were very beneficial to Pirandello's further literary development. He continued to study, to write, and to meet with his intellectual friends to discuss art and ideas. The discussions were more vivacious and stimulating than ever. He intensified his collaborations with newspaper editors and other journalists in magazines such as *La Critica* (The Critique) and *La Tavola Rotonda* (The Round Table). In the latter, he published the first part of the *Dialogi tra Il Gran Me e Il Piccolo Me* (Dialogues between The Big Me and The Little Me, 1895). His wife had no comprehension of his art or the ideas he was discussing or writing about; she saw her task as keeping her home a tranquil place for their family life. She bore Pirandello three children: Stefano (1895-1972), Rosalia (1897-1971), and Fausto (1899-1975).

Alongside his writing career, he began teaching Italian at the *Istituto Superiore di Magistero di Roma* (Higher Institute of Teaching of Rome) in 1897, a teachers college for women, where he continued to teach until 1923. In 1898 he collaborated with Italo Falbo and Ugo Fleres to found the weekly periodical, *Ariel*, in which he published his one-act play *L'Epilogo* (The Summary or The Epilogue, 1898), later changed to *La Morsa* (The Vice, 1910).

By the turn of the 20th century, Pirandello had established himself as a popular writer of short stories and novellas. He was becoming a prolific writer with much of his work published in popular newspapers and magazines. In 1900, he published several of his most celebrated novellas in the periodical *Marzocco: Lumie di Sicilia* (Lumia of Sicily) and *La Paura del Sonno* (The Fear of Sleep). In 1901, his collection of poems, *Zampogna* (The Bagpipe) was published in Rome by the Dante Alighieri Publishing Co. In 1902, the first series of *Beffe della Morte e della Vita* (Mockery of Death and Life) came out. That same year saw the publication of his second novel, *Il Turno* (The Shift).

Things were going along smoothly with Pirandello's family and literary life when tragedy struck in 1903. The sulfur mines in Aragona of both his father and father-in-law in which both the owners had invested a large amount of their own capital, and Stefano had further invested Antonietta's dowry, were flooded by a huge landslide. This calamity provoked severe tensions within Luigi Pirandello's own family. Antonietta suffered a mental breakdown and semi-paralysis after she read the letter from Stefano announcing the tragedy. The illness resulted in a persecution mania, which manifested itself in a frenzied jealousy of her husband and hysterical, false charges of infidelity. She became so violent toward Pirandello that she should have been institutionalized, but he chose instead to keep her at home for sixteen years while she verbally attacked the young writer and his three children. Their daughter, Rosalia, was so disturbed by her mother's illness that she tried to take her own life several years after the tragedy. Fortunately, her instrument of choice, a revolver, was so old as to be of no use. Initially, Pirandello had harbored thoughts of suicide. However, since he had a very sick wife and three young children at home to take care of, he attempted to remedy the situation as best he could by increasing the number of his lessons in both Italian and German, and also asking for compensation from the magazines to which he had freely given away his earlier writings and collaborations. The illness had a profound effect on Pirandello's writing as well, leading him to explorations of madness, illusion, and isolation. (It was not until his plays finally began to prove profitable, around 1919, that he was able to send Antonietta to a private sanitarium, the Psychiatric Hospital of Santa Maria della Pietà in Rome, for care. This separation from his wife, despite her morbid jealousies and hallucinations directed at him, caused great suffering for Pirandello, who, even as late as 1924, believed he could still properly care for her at home. She never left the asylum and ultimately died there in 1959).

The novel which he had been writing during this horrible time began appearing in installments in the magazine *Nuova Antologia* (New Anthology). It was entitled *Il Fu Mattia Pascal* (The Late Mattia Pascal, 1904) and contained many elements of the terrible autobiographical situation the author was facing, but presented in a fantastical way. It was an immediate and great success. Although its theme was not typically what Pirandello wrote about, since the obstacles confronting its hero result from external circumstances, it was already beginning to show the acute psychological observation that he later directed toward the exploration of his characters' subconscious in his novels and especially in his dramas.

Pirandello's understanding of psychology was sharpened by his reading such works as *Les Altérations de la Personnalité* (The Alterations of the Personality, 1892), by the French experimental psychologist Alfred Binet. Traces of its influence can be seen in Pirandello's long essay *L'Umoreismo* (On Humor, 1908) in which he examined the principles of his craft. A common theme to both books was the theory of the subconscious personality, which postulated that what a person knows, or thinks he knows, is the least part of what he really is. Thus, Pirandello had begun to focus his writing on the themes of psychology even before he knew of the work of Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. The psychological themes used by Pirandello found their most complete expression in the volumes of short stories *La Trappola* (The Trap, 1915) and *E Domani, Lunedì . . .* (And Tomorrow, Monday . . ., 1917).

By the time World War I broke out in 1914, he had published two other novels and numerous short stories. It was not until 1916, however, that he turned his attention to the theater. He quickly became enthralled by this new (to him) medium, and especially with the opportunity to explore the psychological conflicts and motivations of his characters in a more direct way than in the

written word. He became very prolific in this new medium, turning out as many as nine plays in one year. His first three plays, *Meglio Pensarci Due Volte!* (Better Think Twice About It!), *Liolà*, and *Così è (Se Vi Pare)* [Right You Are! (If You Think So)], were each written in less than a week in 1916. *Così è (Se Vi Pare)* became the most important of this trio. It began the series of plays that were to make Pirandello world famous in the 1920s. It was a demonstration, in dramatic terms, of the relativity of truth, and a rejection of the idea of any objective reality that is not at the mercy of individual vision. It anticipates Pirandello's two great masterpieces written within a five-week period in 1921: *Sei Personaggi in Cerca d'Autore* (Six Characters in Search of an Author), which premiered in 1921, and *Enrico IV* (Henry IV), which premiered in 1922.

Sei Personaggi in Cerca d'Autore was a fantasy that comments on the limits of the conventional stage and the mystery of the human personality. It is the most arresting presentation of the typical Pirandellian contrast between art, which is unchanging, and life, which is in constant flux. Characters that have been rejected by their author materialize on stage, throbbing with a more intense vitality than the real actors, who, inevitably, distort their drama as they attempt its presentation. It had a scandalous opening in Rome where it was a clamorous failure, with the public divided into supporters and adversaries, the latter shouting, "Asylum, Asylum!" Pirandello, who was present at the performance with his 24-year-old daughter Rosalia, left through a side exit to avoid the crowd of enemies. This fiasco was followed soon after with a successful opening in Milan. Almost overnight, it became so popular that it was being produced on stage in London, in New York, and in Germany.

Enrico IV (Henry IV) had a much more successful and less controversial premiere in Milan. Its theme is madness, which lies just under the skin of ordinary life and is, perhaps, superior to ordinary life in its construction of a satisfying reality. The play's main character appears to be insane and is encouraged to believe that he is a Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV. The play finds dramatic strength in that hero's choice of retirement into unreality in preference to life in the "reality" of this uncertain world.

Between 1922 and 1924, Pirandello became a major public figure. His plays were being performed in cities around the world. In Paris, he was awarded the Legion of Honor.

PIRANDELLO AND MUSSOLINI

In 1924 Pirandello wrote a letter to Mussolini requesting that he be admitted to the National Fascist Party. His relationship with Mussolini has been the subject of much debate. Some scholars have suggested that his enthusiastic adoption of Fascism was simply a matter of practicality, a strategic ploy to advance his career. Had he opposed the Fascist regime, it would have meant serious difficulties for him and for his art. Acceptance, on the other hand, meant subsidies and publicity. (His statement that "I am a Fascist because I am an Italian" has often been invoked to support this theory). To this end, in 1925, Pirandello, with the help of Mussolini, assumed the artistic direction and ownership of the *Teatro d'Arte di Roma* (The Art Theater of Rome) that had been founded in 1924 by the *Gruppo degli Undici* (The Group of Eleven), a group of young intellectuals who wanted a company to perform new plays. Through Mussolini's support, Pirandello achieved international fame, and a worldwide tour of the *Teatro d'Arte di Roma* company ensued in 1925-27, which introduced London, Paris, Vienna, Prague, Budapest, and several cities in Germany,

Argentina, and Brazil to the intriguing intellectual contortions of “Pirandellian” theater. (Following the tour, his international notoriety emboldened him to change some of his plays in order to call attention to himself, which he also did in some of his short stories, where it is the surrealistic and fantastic elements that are accentuated).

Other scholars have argued that he was really not supportive of the Fascist cause at all. They point to the fact that he had continuous conflicts with Fascist leaders, especially about how the theater was run (e.g. the plays that he presented were not supportive of Fascist values) and over budget issues. In 1927 he even tore his Fascist membership card to pieces in front of the startled Secretary-General of the Fascist Party. The Fascists realized that he was, at best, a very lukewarm supporter. For the remainder of his life, Pirandello was always under close surveillance by the secret Fascist police, the OVRA. These scholars also point to his last play that was left unfinished at his death, *I Giganti della Montagna* (The Giants of the Mountain, 1936), which has often been interpreted as showing Pirandello’s growing realization that the Fascist giants were hostile to culture.

And yet, during his last appearance in New York, Pirandello voluntarily distributed a statement announcing his support of Italy’s annexation of Abyssinia. He even gave his Nobel medal over to the Italian government in 1935 to be melted down to help pay for the Abyssinian campaign. Pirandello was a complex person, and all that can be certain in his case is that nothing is certain.

Uno, Nessuno e Centomila (One, No One and One Hundred Thousand) was Pirandello’s last, and perhaps his greatest, novel. He began writing it in 1909 but never finished it until decades later. In an autobiographical letter, published in 1924, he referred to this work as the “...bitterest of all, profoundly humoristic, about the decomposition of life: Moscarda [the main protagonist in the novel] one, no one and one hundred thousand.” In the novel, Vitangelo Moscarda discovers by way of a completely irrelevant question that his wife poses to him that everyone he knows, everyone he has ever met, has constructed a persona of him in their own imaginations and that none of these personas corresponds to the image that Vitangelo himself has constructed and believes himself to be in reality. The novel forces the reader into a cruel game of falsifying projections, mirroring the reality of social existence itself, which completely dictate their own rules. As a result, the first, ironic “awareness” of Vitangelo consists in the knowledge of that which he definitely is not. The novel goes on to emphasize that this awareness is the first step and must consist of the spiteful destruction of all these fictitious masks in order to get to what Vitangelo believes is his “real” self. This search for authenticity was a predominant theme of Pirandello’s narrative writings, and in this last novel it has reached its highest manifestation in the adventures of Vitangelo Moscarda.

The pages of the unfinished novel remained on Pirandello’s desk and he would occasionally take out extracts and insert them into his other works only to return, later, to the novel itself in a sort of uninterrupted compositional circle. Finally finished, *Uno, Nessuno e Centomila* was published in episodes between December, 1925 and June, 1926, in the magazine *Fiera Letteraria* (Literary Fair).

LATER YEARS AND NOBEL PRIZE

The *Teatro d'Arte di Roma* was dissolved in 1928 because of financial losses that the Fascist government was unwilling to tolerate. After this closure, although he had reached his peak of dramatic originality with *Sei Personaggi in Cerca d'Autore*, Pirandello continued to write until the time of his death and continued to experience a great deal of critical success. Appropriately, it was also in the theater that Pirandello finally found a more understanding relationship with a woman, the Italian actress Marta Abba (1900-1988) for whom he wrote most of his later plays. In 1931, Judith Anderson appeared on Broadway in Pirandello's *As You Desire Me*. In the film version, Anderson was replaced by an even bigger star—Greta Garbo. At the time of his death in 1936, he was in negotiations to appear in a film version of *Sei Personaggi in Cerca d'Autore*.

Pirandello spent his remaining years in frequent and extensive travel to places around the world where he was fêted as a major literary figure of the 20th century. He was nominated to the *Reale Accademia d'Italia* (Royal Academy of Italy) in 1929. In 1934 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature after being nominated by Guglielmo Marconi, who was also a member of the Royal Academy of Italy and the Nobel Prize for Physics co-winner in 1909. (Pirandello was the last Italian playwright to be chosen for the award until it was awarded to Dario Fo in 1997).

Luigi Pirandello died alone in his home at 15 Via Bosio, Rome, on December 10, 1936. He had left specific instructions for his funeral, saying, "When I am dead, do not clothe me. Wrap me naked in a sheet. No flowers on the bed and no lighted candle. A pauper's cart. Naked. And let no one accompany me, neither relatives nor friends. The cart, the horse, the coachmen, *e basta!* (and that's enough!). Burn me." However, since the Church opposed cremation and the Fascist government refused to allow him a pauper's death, his wishes were ignored. He was given a state funeral in Rome. In 1947, following the establishment of the new Italian government after World War II, his remains were re-interred in his native Agrigento, Sicily.

ASSESSMENT

As the Nobel Prize Committee said in giving the award for literature to Pirandello, it was "for his bold and ingenious revival of dramatic and scenic art." Pirandello was clearly the greatest Italian playwright of the 20th century, and he has left a lasting mark on all the playwrights from around the world that have followed him. In his agony over the illusory nature of existence and the isolation of the human being, he anticipates such writers as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Eugene Ionesco. Perhaps Pirandello best summed up his art himself when he said, "I have tried to tell something to other men, without any ambition, except perhaps that of avenging myself for having been born."

Pirandello's dramas explore the fragmentation of our understanding of reality that comes with the experiences of the 20th century. The scientific theories of relativity and of uncertainty--especially the ideas of Albert Einstein (who was a friend of Pirandello) regarding the former, and those of Werner Heisenberg regarding the latter--influenced his dramatic work. The theories that underlay the new scientific field of quantum mechanics represented a further upheaval of the Newtonian notion that human beings can bring order and understanding to the reality around them.

The theater of the absurd that Pirandello pioneered reflected this trend to see reality as having no central static base from which to guide our understanding. Typical for his plays was to show how fiction mixes with reality and how people see things in very different ways from one another. Art was for Pirandello the ultimate paradox, in which reality is at the same time true and false, and the unmasking of illusions often causes violence.

Over and over, he investigated questions of reality, identity, intention and sanity. He seemed to be saying, in many different ways, that a human personality cannot and must not be violated, that its true nature cannot really be known, but must be respected. His best-known play, *Sei Personaggi in Cerca d'Autore*, turns upon the ineffective efforts of six actors to interpret a difficult family tragedy. He found both comic and tragic qualities in these kinds of problems. His remarkable genius forced his readers and audiences to confront the tensions that are present in human existence.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

Famous Bio website; Frenz, Horst (ed). "Luigi Pirandello." Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Elsevier Publishing Company, 1969, taken from the Nobel Prize website; Imagi-Nation website; New World Encyclopedia website; Theatre Database website; Whitfield, John Humphreys. "Luigi Pirandello: Italian Author." Encyclopedia Britannica website; Wikipedia website.

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