Right You Are, If You Think You Are Study Guide

Right You Are, If You Think You Are by Luigi Pirandello

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Introduction

As with many of Pirandello's plays, *Right You Are, If You Think You Are* is an adaptation of one of his short stories, "Signora Frola and Signer Ponza, Her Son-in-Law," published in 1915. The story concerns the conflicting versions of the truth told by the characters of the title, and comes right to the point by declaring that one of them is mad. Determining which one is mad, and where fantasy meets reality, is the focus of the play and of the townspeople. Signora Frola explains that her son-in-law went mad when her daughter, his wife, died four years ago, then remarried but fantasizes that the new wife is his old wife. For his part, Ponza claims that Signora Frola could not accept her daughter's death, went mad, and only survives by believing that his second wife is in actuality her living daughter; it is for this reason, he says, that he guards his wife so jealously. In the play, as Renate Matthei describes in her 1973 work on Pirandello, "the social role built up by one character for himself is continually destroyed by another, devaluated into a sick sham existence that outsiders accept as real only out of pity." Neither the short story nor the play gives the satisfaction of an answer; in fact, the ambiguities expand as the townspeople press for more data in their vain attempts to fix reality through the unreliable medium of perception. Both the play and the short story are representative of Pirandello's obsession with the fine line between fantasy and reality as they are experienced in human consciousness. As he explained to his son in a 1916 letter, the plot is a "great deviltry."

Author Biography

Luigi Pirandello was born to affluent parents in 1867 in a small provincial town in Sicily. He was sensitive and ill-suited to follow his robust and occasionally violent father into the family business of sulphur mining, and led a rather sheltered life until he went to college, first in Rome, and then in Bonn, Germany. There he began to bloom intellectually, and he led an active social life, though he longed for his own sunny climate. His happiness lasted until his arranged marriage with the daughter of one his father's business partners. Antonietta was an unsuitable wife for Pirandello, but he immediately fastened his illusions of love onto her. Early in their marriage, Pirandello's father's firm failed, forcing Pirandello to take a teaching job to support his young family. Antonietta had been jealously overprotected by her father, and with the added financial stress, she, in her own turn, tortured her new husband with insane jealousy. For seventeen years she haunted his and their three children's lives until Pirandello committed her to an asylum. He continued to teach school, without enjoying it, until his literary career took hold. In 1925, Pirandello fell in love with a beautiful young actress named Marta Abba. Marta kept the older man at arm's length as she pursued her acting career. A recently published volume of his letters to her show him vacillating wildly between suicidal depression and euphoric mania for the rest of his life.

Pirandello was fairly well known for his short stories and novels before he turned to the theatre and made his name with *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). Many of his works concern the self, or more specifically, consciousness. For this he was called the founder of modern theatre, since modernism, too, is concerned with the instability and fabrication of the self. Pirandello portrayed consciousness as fleeting, unreliable, and idiosyncratic, affected as it is by memory, personality, and mood. Once Pirandello discovered the theatre, he devoted himself to modernizing Italian theater through new kinds of repertoire and acting, and then educating his audiences to appreciate it. Unfortunately, the impoverished years following World War I and the rise of Fascism in Italy during the years before World War II made the success of his experimental theater, Teatro d' Arte, all but impossible (even with Mussolini's patronage), though similar projects were flourishing elsewhere in Europe. A fascist sympathizer, Pirandello publicly joined the party in 1924 to help boost Mussolini's popularity. When his Teatro d'Arte di Roma closed in 1928 due to lack of funds, Pirandello left for Germany to participate in the newly invented cinema, to adapt several of his plays for the "talkies." He became more popular in Germany and the rest of Europe than in Italy. He resented Italy's aloofness, and determined not to return, saying, "I am a foreigner in Italy." However, he returned to Rome in 1933 to be near Marta, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934, still admired everywhere but in Italy. He died of pneumonia in 1937.

Plot Summary

Act One

The play opens in the parlor of Commendatore Agazzi. Agazzi's wife Amalia, their daughter Dina, and Amalia's brother Laudisi are arguing about an affront the ladies have suffered from Signora Frola, a newcomer to the town who refused to see them when they called. On a second visit, Ponza, her son-in-law, coolly answered the door and again frustrated their visit. To top it off, the town is curious about Ponza's wife, because she never goes out and never visits her mother, although Ponza does daily. Ladisi accuses the women of nosiness, and is incensed that they intend to have Signer Agazzi complain to Ponza's boss, the Prefect, about his behavior. While they debate whether Ponza has actually done anything wrong, the butler announces visitors. Three town gossips, Sirelli, his wife, and Signora Cini, join in the fray, also eager to know the truth about the newcomers. Laudisi finds their obsession laughable, since as he demonstrates, he himself is "a different person for each of [them]." Signora Sirelli calls his pessimism "dreadful." The new gossips mention that Ponza and company's village was destroyed by an earthquake recently, which may explain why they all dress in black. *Agazzi* arrives to announce that he has arranged a visit from Signora Frola herself, and soon thereafter, the old lady is announced.

Signora Frola, a sweet, sad, older lady, apologizes for her negligence of her "social duties," defends her strange family relations, and tells of having lost all of her relatives in the village earthquake. The group pursues her with questions, and they worm out of her that Ponza loves her daughter so jealously that he insists on their communicating only through him. Despite this, she considers him a loving son-in-law. After she leaves, the group condemns Ponza for his cruelty. Now, Ponza himself arrives, and is coldly received. But he throws everyone off with a complex explanation that his mother-in-law is insane, that her daughter is really dead, that his present wife is his second wife, although Signo-ra Frola thinks she is her daughter. Ponza keeps them separated to protect his new wife. Now Ponza's story is accepted.

They are processing new attitudes when the butler announces another visitor: Signora Frola again. After mildly chastising them for interfering with her family, she reveals that it is not she, but Ponza who is mad, with delusions that his wife had died. Signora Frola claims that the daughter actually survived, but to go along with Ponza's delusions, she remarried him. Signora Frola insists that Ponza keeps her locked up out of fear of losing her. For herself, Signora Frola feigns madness to sustain Ponza's delusion. The curtains falls with Laudisi laughing at the stunned busybodies.

Act Two

Act Two opens in Agazzi's study. Agazzi is on the phone with police commissioner, Centuri, asking if he has found anything in his investigation of the Ponza story. Centuri

reports that all the village records had been destroyed by the earthquake. Laudisi advises Agazzi and Sirelli to believe both stories, or neither. He sums up the essence of the play's conflict:

She [signora Frola] has created for him, or he for her, a world of fancy which has all the earmarks of reality itself. And in this fictitious reality they get along perfectly well, and in full accord with each other; and this world of fancy, this reality of theirs, no document can possibly destroy because the air they breathe is of that world if you could get a death certificate or a marriage certificate or something of the kind, you might be able to satisfy that stupid curiosity of yours. Unfortunately, you can't get it. And the result is that you are in the extraordinary fix of having before you, on the one hand, a world of fancy, and on the other, a world of reality, and you, for the life of you, are not able to distinguish one from the other.

They ignore him. Now, Sirelli hatches the idea to bring Ponza and his mother-in-law together, so they can sort out the truth. Even though Laudisi finds this laughable, a ruse is undertaken to bring them to Agazzi's house without letting on that the other will be there. All depart except Laudisi, who looks into a mirror and wonders aloud whether he or the image is the lunatic. "What fools these mortals be, as old Shakespeare said," he muses. The butler sees Laudisi talking to himself and wonders if the man is crazy, then announces the arrival of two more gossips, Signora Cini and Nenni. Laudisi has some fun with the butler by asking whether he is the version of Laudisi they want to see, and the ladies are shown in. Laudisi teases them with the thought that a certificate of the second marriage has been found, but bursts their bubble by adding it may be a fraud. Dina arrives with news of other documents: Signora Frola has shown her and Amalia letters written to her by her daughter. Arguments ensue until Ponza and the old lady arrive; the men and women stay in separate rooms. Suddenly, Ponza hears Signora Frola playing a piano piece that his wife, Lena, used to play. He becomes agitated, and the ladies are brought in. Not only is the mystery is not solved, but it is only further complicated by another name, Julia, his name for his second wife, Julia. Signora Frola pretends to go along with Ponza's delusions, and then goes home. By now all are convinced that he is mad, but then he explains to them that he was only acting agitated to sustain her delusions that her daughter is really dead. When he departs, they all stand "in blank amazement," except for Laudisi, who once again is laughing as the curtain falls.

Act Three

Back in Agazzie's study, Laudisi is reading a book when Police Commissioner Centuri arrives with the news that he has proof at last. Laudisi reads it and announces that it proves nothing, then proposes that the commissioner make up something more "precise," for the sake of peace in the town. Centuri refuses, not realizing that his findings are equally uncertain. A witness has stated that he *thinks* that the "Frola woman" was in a sanitarium. Not knowing which Frola woman is meant makes the evidence valueless. Laudisi now hits upon a foolproof solution to interview the wife. Sirelli, with growing skepticism, suggests that an interview will work only if the prefect

himself conducts the interview. The commissioner goes off to arrange it. Everyone feels certain that the truth is at hand, but Laudisi spoils their hope by casting doubt on the existence of the wife; after all, no one has ever seen her!

The prefect arrives. Although trustful of Ponza (his secretary), he agrees to conduct the interview. As a formality, he asks Ponza's permission first. But Ponza surprises him by offering his resignation before the words are barely out of the prefect's mouth. The Prefect offers assurances of his trust, adding that he is performing the interview only to assure the others. Ponza refuses "to submit to such an indignity." His anxiety and protests succeed in making the prefect skeptical. Finally, Ponza relents and goes to get his wife. He plans to keep his mother-in-law out of the way himself, during the interview.

Unfortunately, Signora Frola comes to visit just at the wrong moment. She wants to say goodbye, for she plans to leave town. Agazzi tells her that her son-in-law is about to arrive. She begs the townspeople to stop tormenting her family, and begins to weep. As the prefect tries to console her, a woman dressed in deep mourning, her face concealed by a thick veil, appears at the door. Signora Frola shrieks, "Lena!" and Ponza dashes into the room shrieking "No! Julia!" He is too late to stop Signora Frola from grasping the woman in an embrace, just the event he had wanted to avoid. The veiled woman dismisses them both coldly, and they depart arm in arm, weeping. The final twist to the plot comes when the veiled woman proclaims to the group that she is both "the daughter of Signora Frola and the second wife of Signer Ponza" but for herself, "nobody." She exits, and the curtain falls on Laudisi, saying "you have the truth! But are you satisfied?" He laughs ironically.

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

The story of this play focuses on the way the relationships of an unconventional family are examined and criticized by the nosy and judgmental citizens of a small town. Its themes examine questions relating to definitive truth, the relationship between truth and perception and the reliability of self-knowledge.

The first act is set in the drawing room of Agazzi's home. Laudisi listens with increasing impatience as Amalia and Dina tell him with increasing intensity and insistence how strange the situation in which they find themselves has become. A subordinate of Agazzi's, who is also a subordinate of the Prefect (a chief justice or sheriff), has rented an apartment in their building for his mother-in-law. The woman refused to allow them into her home when they paid a call. Laudisi asks whether that's a good enough reason for them to lodge a formal complaint with Agazzi about his subordinate's behavior. Amalia says it's an awful way for two women to be treated, adding that they were only trying to make the woman feel welcome since she's new in town. Dina admits that they were there partially out of curiosity, speaking metaphorically about how curiosity is natural.

Laudisi tells the women that for a formal complaint to be justified, they have to prove that Ponza, the subordinate, moved his mother-in-law into the building for the deliberate purpose of upsetting them. Dina says they don't believe that's what he did, but they do believe he's strange. She explains that when he moved to town, he rented an apartment on the top floor of a run-down apartment block on the outskirts of town for him and his wife, as opposed to the nice apartment in a nice building he rented for his mother-in-law. She also says that the only communication in and out of the apartment is through a basket that's raised and lowered from the balcony and that Ponza is keeping his wife a prisoner. Amalia then adds that not only is Ponza's mother-in-law kept in a nicer apartment, but she's not allowed to see her daughter. Laudisi suggests that Ponza and his mother-in-law just don't get along. Dina calls him stupid, saying that Ponza and his mother-in-law are always seen walking about the town together, talking affectionately. Amalia adds that Ponza comes by every morning to see how his mother-in-law is doing. Laudisi suggests, half-jokingly, that they're having an affair, but Dina tells him the mother-in-law is old and infirm. Amalia adds that mother and daughter communicate like everyone else - via letters that go up and down in the basket.

A Butler appears and announces the arrival of visitors, Signor and Signora Sirelli and their friend Signora Cini.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

This play is essentially a satire, a style of comedy in which the habits, belief systems or philosophies of an individual or group are exaggerated in order to make fun of them. There are two satirical targets here, the habit of nosiness and the philosophy of self-righteousness, or the belief that someone knows better than someone else how that person should live his or her life. Almost all the central characters, in this scene and throughout the play, embody both these characteristics to a comic extreme. In particular, the excessive and melodramatic outrage here of both Amalia and Dina, and later of the Sirellis and Signora Cini, make the satiric and thematic point that such outrage is simply foolish and that expecting other people to live up to one's standards of behavior is also foolish.

At the same time, a common technique in satire is the use and development of a contrasting character, someone whose perspectives and attitudes make those of the play's satirical targets seem even more ridiculous by comparison. Laudisi performs that function here, clearly coming across in this act and throughout the play as a voice of reason. His efforts to calm Amalia and Dina and to discover the details of what has upset them clearly portray him as reasonable and intelligent, characteristics missing to various degrees in many of the other, more satirical, characters. Later in the play, his comments become pointed and sarcastic as he attempts to puncture the balloon of narrow-minded self-righteousness in which the other characters live, but for now he's just trying to understand. That being said, his questions and opinions in this scene perform another function - creating an opportunity for exposition, or definition of the play's essential dramatic situation. In other words, because Amalia and Dina have to explain what's going on to him, they're also explaining it to the audience and therefore drawing us into the story.

An interesting parallel between two mother/daughter relationships is glimpsed in this scene. In the same way as the calm and reasonable Laudisi defines the unreasonableness of several other characters by being a contrast, so the apparently distant relationship between Ponza's wife and mother-in-law is defined by its contrast to the apparently close and open relationship between Amalia and Dina.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Amalia and Signora Sirelli greet each other. There are introductions all around, and Signora Sirelli tells Amalia they've come to find out what she knows about Ponza. Amalia says she knows nothing. Sirelli tells his wife that he was right when he said Amalia wouldn't know anything, but he admits he's also curious about why the mother isn't allowed to see her daughter. As Laudisi calls them all a pack of gossips, Sirelli says he knows for a fact Ponza keeps his wife locked in at home. Laudisi tells them they're not getting any closer to the truth of the situation, saying it's impossible to know anything about other people - who they are, what they're doing and why they do it. Signora Sirelli says it's perfectly possible to know about other people, saying all people have to do is tell each other what they know. She and Sirelli argue briefly over who tells who more in their marriage and who is to be believed more. Laudisi laughs and says they're both to be believed equally, since they each talk about things that are true according to them and their experiences. In other words, they're both telling the truth *as they see it.*

As the Sirellis accuse each other of always being wrong, Laudisi says who's right and who's wrong depends on who's speaking and who's listening, demonstrating how he seems different to each person in the room. Signora Sirelli says she's always the same, to all people all the time. Laudisi points out that she would naturally seem that way to herself but that in fact she's different with different people. Sirelli asks what all this has to do with the current situation, and Laudisi says they're all driving themselves crazy trying to explain what's going on with Ponza and his family based on what they think or believe they should be doing. Signora Cini questions what's to be believed if they can't believe what they see or touch. Laudisi tells her that's exactly what they should believe, but should allow other people to believe in what they see and what they touch.

Signora Sirelli becomes exasperated with him and turns away. Amalia and Dina urge Laudisi to go into another room, but he refuses, saying he wants to listen to their gossip but will say nothing. He stays and listens as Amalia, Dina, the Sirellis and Signora Cini gossip and argue about how nobody is allowed to see the mother-in-law. They mention that the entire family dresses in black except that nobody has seen the wife to know she dresses in black. Their gossip reveals how the family moved from a village that was destroyed in an earthquake. Amalia and Dina refer to how frightening Ponza's eyes are, how rude he seems and how they think the lack of courtesy shown to Amalia is something that should be punished, since she's the wife of a high official in the town.

Agazzi comes in. The others greet him and introduce him, and then Agazzi makes the announcement that Signora Frola, the mother-in-law, is about to visit. He explains that he couldn't let Amalia and Dina be treated so rudely, so he told the Prefect about what happened. The Prefect was unhappy that a subordinate should treat the wife of his immediate superior so badly. He also says the Prefect had already heard rumors about

Ponza's behavior and has insisted that the mystery be cleared up once and for all. Laudisi laughs, and Amalia explains to Agazzi that he thinks they're all being foolish because it's impossible to know the truth.

A Butler comes in and announces the arrival of Signora Frola.

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

What the audience begins to see in this scene is a thematically and satirically relevant point about the way people's imaginations and sense of self-importance run away with them. We see this through the increasingly imaginative curiosities and wonderings of the Agazzis, the Sirellis and Signora Cini. We also see it through Agazzi's pompous assertions that nobody in his position should be treated the way Ponza treats him and other people of the town. This refers not only to the fact that Signora Frola hasn't welcomed visitors but also the fact that the entire Ponza family doesn't seem to think and feel the way the people of the town think they should. In other words, Agazzi and the whole "Sirelli crowd" think that Ponza and his family should behave in a particular way, becoming angry and judgmental because they don't.

The device of contrast is again used effectively in this scene. In the middle of the increasingly hysterical and fantastic arguments about what's going on in Ponza's family, Laudisi continues to make rational and thematically relevant points about how no one can truly know anything about other people. Also, Ponza refers to the way our sense of truth depends solely upon our perceptions and how foolish it is to judge the ways of others from the basis of those perceptions. Here, he is stating outright the play's themes and warnings related to the foolishness of having unconsidered opinions or passing hasty judgments. Those themes are made with equal effectiveness throughout the play, particularly in its final moments. Between now and then, however, there are more satirical points to be made about being judgmental, points that begin to be made following the appearance of Signora Frola in the following scene.

Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

Signora Frola comes in. Amalia makes introductions, and Signora Frola apologizes for not fulfilling her social duties by paying and receiving visits. Agazzi admits that he was upset by her refusal to see his wife. Signora Frola explains she's still upset because of the earthquake, revealing that Ponza lost almost his entire family. The Agazzis, the Sirellis and Signora Cini all ask pointed questions about what she experienced and about why after such a traumatic experience Signora Frola isn't spending more time with her daughter. Signora Frola comments that young wives prefer to spend time with their husbands. When Laudisi agrees with her, Signora Sirelli tells him to be quiet, and Signora Frola tells him she's grateful for his support. Sirelli asks why her daughter doesn't go out much. Signora Cini suggests it's because she's taking care of children, but Signora Frola explains that there are no children. People from the country like those in her family prefer to stay indoors much of the time, and she goes to visit her daughter once or twice a day, she says. Sirelli and Agazzi ask pointed questions about how Signora Frola and her daughter communicate. Signora Frola becomes nervous, and Dina talks about how she couldn't stand it if the only way she could communicate with her mother was by shouting off a balcony.

As Signora Frola begins to explain, Sirelli interrupts with the assumption that the reason she and her daughter don't meet face to face is Ponza's negative attitude. Signora Frola tells him he's wrong and explains how wonderful Ponza is to both her and her daughter, saying Ponza loves her daughter so much that he wants to keep her attention and affection for himself. When Sirelli, Agazzi and the others describe the situation as cruel and selfish, Signora Frola tells them it's an act of complete mutual devotion and that she as a mother respects and honors whatever makes her daughter happy. She explains that when the baskets are raised and lowered off the balcony, they contain letters between mother and daughter and that they're all perfectly happy and satisfied. As she prepares to go, she says Ponza is a good man, even though he has his weaknesses, and that people all get along better by thinking charitably of each other. She then thanks Amalia and Dina for calling on her, adding that she hopes they've forgiven her. Agazzi express his gratitude for her coming by, and Amalia shows her out.

Amalia returns, and immediately gossip begins again. Signora Sirelli and Dina talk about the torment Signora Frola and her daughter must be suffering, while Agazzi says that what Signora Frola said wasn't an explanation. Laudisi comments that what struck him the most was Signora Frola's concern for her son-in-law's reputation, but the others condemn her for condoning his cruelty. The Butler appears, announcing Ponza's arrival. As he goes out to fetch Ponza, the others wonder what he's doing there.

Ponza comes in. Agazzi introduces him and assumes he's come on private business, but Ponza tells him he wants as many people as possible to hear what he's come to say. Agazzi tries to assure him that the conflict over his mother-in-law's refusal to see

Amalia and Dina has been resolved, but Ponza says that's not what he's there for. When he adds that Signora Frola would have called first if he hadn't forbidden her to do so, Agazzi demands that he explain. Ponza then says he assumes Signora Frola came to complain about him, but Amalia tells him she had nothing but good things to say about him. The others repeat other positive things she said, but Agazzi says he thinks what Ponza is doing is both harsh and cruel.

Ponza says Signora Frola is in a pitiable condition, explaining that the death of her daughter four years ago drove her mad. His current wife is his second wife, and when Signora Frola saw her for the first time, she believed that the second wife was her daughter come back to life. He then explains that the arrangement they've made, involving Signora Frola's beliefs about Ponza's obsessive love and the letter/basket communication scheme, makes Signora Frola happy and has eased her symptoms of insanity. He goes on to talk about the sacrifices he's making to continue the charade. He pays the costs of maintaining two homes and keeps a close watch on Signora Frola, and his own social life suffers because he has to keep a constant eye on the situation. He also says that he allowed Signora Frola to call because his job was becoming endangered. Allowing her to call and reveal her version of the truth was the only way in which the whole arrangement could be allowed to continue. He apologizes for having intruded and goes out.

The Agazzis and Sirellis can't believe what they have just heard, but nonetheless they say there was something about Signora Frola that struck them as not quite right. As they debate whether an insane woman would act in the way she did and accept the things she's accepted, they ask Laudisi his opinion. He refuses to say anything.

The Butler returns with the news that Signora Frola has come back. Amalia tells him to show her in, and after the Butler goes, she, Agazzi and the Sirellis worry about how she'll act and how they'll act around her. Signora Frola comes in. Seeing the expressions on their faces, she assumes they think she's a lunatic, saying to Amalia that she wishes everything had been left as it was and that neither of them had called. She says she knows Ponza was there. She knows he was discussing her and her daughter, and she hopes he was calm, adding that she's come to tell them all the truth about him. She explains that she knows what he tells people about her, and she knows how strange it must all look. She thinks whatever their situation is shouldn't matter if he does a good job. She talks enthusiastically about what a hard worker he is and how he shouldn't be hurt, personally or professionally, by the reappearance of misfortune. When the others ask her what she means, she tells a long story about how Ponza came to believe his wife died when in fact she never did, and he refused to believe she was alive. She says the only way the marriage could continue was if the wife pretended to be another woman who loved and married him. He's now completely afraid that this wife too will be taken from him. She adds that's the reason he keeps her locked up at home. She says that he worships his wife and that she (his wife/her daughter) is "one of the happiest women in the world." Signora Frola says she has to go, adding that if Ponza came and found she was not at home, his fragile emotional state would become even more unstable. As she goes, she says it's hard on both her and her daughter, but their

sacrifices are easier to bear because they're doing another human being good. She goes out, bidding them all good afternoon.

Laudisi comes forward, laughing about how everyone wanted so badly to know the truth.

Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

This section contains an excellent example of how story, or action, defines theme. The three stories told by Ponza and Signora Frola are three versions of their truth, all offered with equal passion and compassion, and all listened to with varying degrees of disbelief, perhaps as much by the audience as by the characters. None of these truths correspond to what the other characters think is the way life should be lived. In other words, the action of the scene illustrates the play's thematic position outlined in Laudisi's statement that no one can know the truth of any person's experience except that person.

Another example of the way action defines or illuminates theme can be found in the way characters throughout this act are repeatedly introduced to each other. At its most basic level, an introduction is one person defining someone to someone else. A person can introduce him or herself or another person, but ultimately what that person is doing is establishing identity. In this play, where questions of identity are in most cases related to what people think or assume about the person being introduced, the act of introduction takes on additional meaning. In other words, the identity being established is at first defined by the person performing the introduction, but the person who is introduced later defines it. For example, Ponza is defined in his introduction by who Agazzi thinks he is, but later he defines himself as someone completely different. The course of action is similar in the section in which Signora Frola first appears, with both situations making the thematic point that identity/truth isn't as we define it for others but as we define it for ourselves. This idea is stated outright in Laudisi's earlier comments to Signora Sirelli and referred to ironically in Laudisi's line that closes this scene, in which he outright laughs at the attempts of the Sirelli crowd to get at the truth.

The idea of identity is looked at from another aspect in Signora Frola's repeated comments that Ponza is a good man and a good worker, who shouldn't be judged because of other aspects of his life. She is, in effect, saying that she and Ponza both should be judged not according to who and what and why we think they are, but what they actually do and how they act. Here again, the play's thematic point about the foolishness of living and reacting based on preconceptions is illustrated.

In the middle of all the stories are two secondary thematic statements, made almost in passing. The first is made by Signora Frola when she says, in essence, that life is better lived if people react with compassion and sensitivity to one another. This statement clearly points out that the Sirelli crowd isn't acting with any compassion at all. They want to know the truth, and they want Signora Frola, Ponza and his wife to behave in a way they think is appropriate. The nature and constancy of their questions shows that

clearly, compassion doesn't enter into it for a moment. Once again, contrast in values and perspectives makes a thematic point. In this case, the contrast between Signora Frola's clear compassion for her brother-in-law and the completely uncompassionate attitudes of those who hear, and judge, her story makes the point that in being nosy and judgmental, there is no room for compassion.

Both Signora Frola and Ponza offer the other secondary thematic statement, in their comments about how sacrifice or discomfort is worthwhile if it brings peace and/or happiness to others. The point here is that the Sirelli crowd seems unwilling to sacrifice their own curiosity so that Ponza and Signora Frola can have a little peace. In other words, the Sirelli crowd's poking and prying into the truth creates unhappiness in Ponza and Signora Frola, and also eventually in Signora Ponza, who makes her climactic entrance and plea for peace at the end of the play as the direct result of their nosiness and lack of compassion.

Act 2, Part 1

Act 2, Part 1 Summary

The second act is set in Agazzi's study. Sirelli and Laudisi listen as Agazzi speaks on the phone with Centuri. After he hangs up, he relays that Centuri discovered that the earthquake that destroyed Ponza's village also destroyed all the civic records - births, deaths, marriages, everything. He goes on to explain that everyone who used to live in the village moved, and there's no way to track down where anyone went. All of this means, he says, that there's no way to check on Signora Frola's or Ponza's stories. Laudisi suggests they have a choice. They can believe both or believe neither.

Sirelli holds out hope that there's a document somewhere that will provide proof of something, but Laudisi claims documents are useless, saying again that the truth is defined by the experiences of the two people they're questioning. He goes on to say that the facts of the situation are explained by both stories. No matter which version of the truth is believed, the world Signora Frola and Ponza have created is equally real to both of them and suits them both. He concludes by saying that what they all have before them is a world of fantasy on the one hand and a world of reality on the other. Nobody can tell which is which. Agazzi says that Laudisi is talking philosophy when what is really called for is facts. Sirelli suggests they bring Signora Frola and Ponza together, and when they've finished confronting each other, the truth will be clear. Laudisi says he wants to be there so he can laugh.

Agazzi calls in Amalia, and she comes in with Dina and Signora Sirelli. Signora Sirelli wonders how it's possible that Laudisi isn't the least bit curious about the situation like everybody else in the village, but Agazzi tells her to not bother with him. He and Sirelli tell the women to visit Signora Frola, invite her back for tea and visit with her in the drawing room, taking care to make sure the door to the office is open. Agazzi, meanwhile, will lure Ponza back to the apartment. Everyone will be brought together, and the truth of the situation will be revealed. Laudisi makes a joke, and Agazzi tells the women to ignore him. Then, Laudisi makes another joke, and the women go out. Agazzi and Sirelli also go out, and Laudisi wishes them luck.

Left alone, Laudisi speaks in soliloquy to his reflection in a mirror, making jokes about whether he or his reflection is insane and commenting on how they know each other well but that other people don't really know them at all. He quotes jokingly from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* about "what fools these mortals be," paying attention to the lives and worries of other people when they really should be paying attention to their own. The Butler appears, watches Laudisi nervously, announces that Signora Cini and another lady have come and says that because nobody else is at home, they want to see Laudisi. Laudisi jokes with the Butler about whether he's really the Laudisi the ladies want to see, and then he sends the Butler out to fetch the women.

The Butler shows in Signora Cini, who introduces her friend Signora Nenni and says she wanted to meet - Laudisi interrupts and suggests she wanted to meet Signora Frola, but Signora Cini says she wanted to meet Amalia. Laudisi comments that all the actors in the little comedy to come are assembled, explaining to the curious Signora Cini that Signora Frola and Ponza are to be brought together so everyone can discover the truth. He teasingly asks her to guess which of them is insane, and she guesses that Ponza is. Signora Nenni adds that all of the women of the town think the same thing, and both she and Signora Cini wonder how the truth was discovered. Laudisi tells them the certificate for Ponza's second marriage has been discovered, which the women interpret to mean that Signora Frola is insane. Laudisi suggests that ultimately documents mean nothing, since the letters that pass between Signora Frola and her daughter are also documents and prove Ponza's story as much as the certificate proves Signora Frola's. Signora Cini complains that because documents aren't really proof, there's no way anyone can be sure of anything. Laudisi jokes about how everyone can be sure about the days of the week and the months of the year, and that's all.

Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

The basic dramatic purpose of this act is to illustrate the lengths to which people will go to satisfy their nosiness. In spite of Laudisi's reasonable arguments, which reiterate the play's central thematic statements about the foolishness of trying to truly know the lives and experiences of others, the Sirelli crowd continues to be both intensely curious and eager to pass judgment. The question is which is more important, the knowledge of the truth or the ability to have opinions about the truth. The action of the first act shows how resentment of the manipulator of the moment, be it Signora Frola or Ponza, and sympathy for the victim of the moment, again Signora Frola or Ponza, are both more avidly expressed than any genuine desire to understand the situation. The feelings and reactions of the crowd are more important to the crowd than the obviously painful situation they're reacting to. This makes it clear that what the Sirelli crowd really wants in this act is to have and express an attitude, rather than compassionately understand the circumstances. All they want is to be right, which is more important to them than being fair.

Laudisi points out the foolishness of the Sirelli crowd's behavior in his comments to Agazzi and Sirelli, in his comments to Signoras Cini and Nenni and in his soliloquy. A soliloquy is a speech spoken by a character alone on stage that reveals his inner thoughts, feelings and experiences. In this case, Laudisi's soliloquy is essentially a reiteration of what he's said before, about how no one can know the truth of another's experience except that person. Interestingly, his debate with his reflection adds another aspect to the thematic question of whether it's truly possible to know anything about anyone by ironically suggesting that a person can't even truly know him or herself. Laudisi asks his reflection which of them is sane, with the idea developed further in his lines at the end of the speech, in which he refers to the way people are so concerned about others that they really know nothing about themselves. The irony is that Signora Frola, Ponza and even his wife, who appears later, know and understand themselves and their situation much better than the Sirelli crowd knows and understands theirs.

The mirror is one of the play's two symbols, the other being Signora Ponza, who appears only in the play's final moments. The mirror represents the potential for misconceptions and misunderstandings by individuals, of themselves and of other people.

Act 2, Part 2

Act 2, Part 2 Summary

Dina comes in and is surprised to see Signora Cini. Laudisi introduces Signora Nenni but gets her name wrong. Dina tells the women to ignore him, adding that she's going to tell her mother Amalia that it's safe to bring Signora Frola over. She talks enthusiastically about how lovely Signora Frola really is, saying she showed them all the letters her daughter had written her. Signora Cini comments that Laudisi just suggested they don't really prove anything, but Dina says they're perfectly real. Amalia comes in, commenting that the whole plot to bring Signora Frola and Ponza together is absurd because there's no need for any more proof. The audience understands her to have the same perspective on the situation as Dina, that Signora Frola is perfectly sane. They talk about how nasty a trick Ponza is playing on Signora Frola, but Laudisi jokingly insists that the outrageousness of the trick means that Signora Frola must be the insane one. Amalia leads the other women into the next room as Laudisi tries to convince Dina to close the door, rather than leave it open as Agazzi told her. He says that if she's truly convinced Signora Frola is sane, she doesn't need to hear anything Ponza says. He also tells her Agazzi is convinced Ponza is sane, and he won't need to hear anything Signora Frola says. Dina tells him if everyone is sure, there's no harm in leaving the door open, as Agazzi asked. A piano is heard offstage, and Dina comments that it must be Signora Frola playing, adding that she played the same piece on the piano in her apartment and told her it was a song her daughter always used to play. She and Laudisi hurry out to listen.

A few moments later, Agazzi comes in with Ponza, who becomes upset as he hears the piano music. He assumes it's Signora Frola playing and asks that she be stopped, saying that playing the song upsets her. He then becomes angry because he thought he'd explained how important it was that she be kept very calm. Agazzi tries to calm him down, but Ponza becomes more and more annoyed, saying that playing the piano is killing her. The conversation in the other room is heard as Signora Frola refers to the way her daughter "plays." Ponza points out that she used the present tense rather than the past tense. As the conversation continues, Ponza becomes more even more irritated, saying Agazzi is trying to ruin him by destroying the peace in his life. Sirelli comes in, and Agazzi tells him to go into the other room and bring in the women. Sirelli goes out to do so, and Ponza protests that he doesn't want to see the women at all.

The women come in. Signora Frola stops short when she sees Ponza, who demands to know what she's been talking about. In spite of her protests and attempts to calm him, he becomes more and more irate, insistently reminding her that her daughter is dead and that he never wants her to play the piano again. He says he destroyed his own piano so his second wife would never sit at it and accidentally play the song his first wife played. Signora Frola continues to try to calm him as Ponza insists that she too is trying to ruin him. Then, he bursts into tears as he accuses her of pretending his first wife isn't dead.

Signora Frola embraces him, saying that she never said her daughter wasn't dead. The other women support her, saying she never said it. She begins to weep as well, saying she'll never play the piano again. Ponza angrily tells her to go home, and she runs out.

Ponza calms himself and explains to the others that he had to pretend to lose his temper in order to repair the damage to his life and situation that their interference had caused. When Agazzi disbelievingly asks whether he really was pretending, Ponza explains that he has to pretend to be mad in order to help Signora Frola to continue believing in her version of reality. He goes out, saying he has to make sure she's all right.

Once again, Laudisi laughs at the others and their attempts to determine the truth.

Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

At the beginning of this scene, the audience sees another way in which the device of introductions illuminates the play's theme. In this case, Laudisi gets Signora Nenni's name wrong, illustrating the way that people's interpretation of the identities of others can also go wrong. The question here is whether he does it deliberately, to make that very point, or whether it's genuinely a mistake. Given the play's thematic context, Laudisi's function as the embodiment of that theme and his penchant for jokes, it seems reasonable to assume he gets the name wrong on purpose in order to reiterate his, and the play's, point about the foolishness of making judgments about identity. The fact that his point goes completely over Dina's head reinforces the idea that she, like the other members of the Sirelli crowd, are determined to believe in their own version of reality rather than pay attention to the reality around them.

Meanwhile, the question about whose story is true becomes more complicated as a result of Ponza's outburst. Initially, Signora Frola says that her daughter is still alive, that Ponza believes she's dead and that Ponza believes he's married to a second wife. Ponza says that Signora Frola believes he's still married to his first wife, but that he's really married to a second. In other words, their beliefs are exactly the opposite. This is the first level of the play's central paradox.

In this scene, Ponza pretends to act according to Signora Frola's beliefs, in order to humor her, playing a role in creating her beliefs. Specifically, he pretends to be mad. He pretends to believe that he's married to a different woman - in other words, pretending to believe what he already claimed to really believe. How could he pretend something he says is true? Does this mean that he's contradicting himself and that he doesn't really believe he's married to a second wife? On the other hand, is his pretension merely that his belief is mad?

This is the second level of the play's central paradox, a term used for a situation in which two apparent truths cancel each other out. This is another way that dramatic action reinforces and/or defines theme. In developing this dramatic, paradoxical situation, the play repeats the previously discussed thematic statement that nobody can

know the truth of an individual's life, not even the individual him or herself. Laudisi's ironic laughter at the end of the scene reinforces the point even further.

Act 3, Part 1

Act 3, Part 1 Summary

The third act also takes place in the office. Laudisi lounges in a chair as, in the background, the sound of several people arguing is heard. The Butler shows in Police Commissioner Centuri and then starts to go into the other room, but Laudisi stops him, saying he'll call the others in himself in a few moments. The Butler goes out, and Laudisi compliments Centuri on the good work he's done, asking whether the information he's uncovered is solid fact. Centuri tells him he's found a few people from Ponza's village and shows Laudisi the letters and communications he's received from them. Laudisi goes through them all, and when he's done, he says there's absolutely nothing of any real significance in them. He suggests that Centuri would be doing a great service to the town and help it get back to normal if he kept the letters to himself and made up a story to tell the public that would resolve the Frola/Ponza situation once and for all. He says that what the town wants is the truth and implies that a forged document would provide it. Centuri says he's amazed Laudisi would suggest such a thing, dismisses the idea and tells him to bring in the others.

Laudisi goes into the other room. There is a moment of silence and then a moment of cheering, and then Agazzi leads in Laudisi, Amalia, Dina, the Sirellis, Signora Cini and Signora Nenni. He greets Centuri, and the others ask excitedly what he's found. Centuri hands Agazzi the letters while the others talk excitedly about how they'll now know the truth. Laudisi announces that the documents prove without a doubt that Signora Frola was once in a sanatorium. The crowd is disappointed, but then Agazzi says the documents say that a witness only thinks she was in a sanatorium and that the Frola woman in question could have been Signora Frola or her daughter (the first wife). Arguments begin over which woman it was, but then Agazzi reports that the witness in question never actually lived in the village but only visited on occasion. Sirelli protests that there's no way they can trust such evidence.

Laudisi points out that because everyone was so disappointed when they thought Signora Frola was the insane one, they obviously want to believe she's actually telling the truth. He suggests that because they want that to be the truth they should accept it as the truth, but Sirelli says that the Prefect has accepted Ponza's story as the truth. Agazzi says that's only because the Prefect has never talked with Signora Frola. The mention of the Prefect triggers an idea in Laudisi, and he suggests that the Prefect is the only person who can truly resolve the situation, since the Prefect is the only person who can order Ponza's wife to come forward and testify. Signora Sirelli says she'll only say what Ponza tells her to say, but Laudisi says she must be allowed to speak with her husband out of the room. Centuri goes out to make the arrangements, and the women congratulate Laudisi on having a clever idea for once.

A comment by Sirelli prompts Laudisi to wonder out loud whether Ponza's wife actually exists. He says there's no guarantee that she does and refers to the possibility that she

could be a fantasy for both Signora Frola and Ponza that they each try to maintain for the other, in the way they maintain their other fantasies. As Laudisi and the others argue over whether the theory makes any sense, Centuri comes in and announces that the Prefect is coming. Agazzi asks how the arrangements could have possibly been made so quickly, and Centuri tells him he saw the Prefect on the street with Ponza, coming towards the house. Agazzi suggests they're actually going to see Signora Frola and asks Centuri to re-direct them to his house. Centuri agrees and goes out. Agazzi tells the women to go into another room, saying it's important for him to be the one to put the proposition to the Prefect. The women go. Agazzi asks Laudisi and Sirelli to stay, and they do.

Act 3, Part 1 Analysis

There is a sense of escalating momentum in this scene, of energy and suspense building towards a climax. The increasing excitement of the Sirelli crowd about the possibility of learning the truth plays a large part in the creation of this momentum, as do the revelations contained in Centuri's documents and the arguments over whether Ponza's wife actually exists.

The most important element of this sense of momentum, however, is the role Laudisi plays in the action. In previous scenes, he's come across as either a voice of reason or a lighthearted joker or both. In this scene, he becomes more forceful, driving the action instead of simply reacting to it. There is the sense that he is manipulating events, people and situations in order to make his point, to force the Sirelli crowd into facing their own foolishness. As such, he embodies and personifies the play's sense of satire, illustrating its theme not only through words, as he has frequently done before, but also through action, forcing people to face the truth about their own foolishness in the way that simply talking about it never could.

Is Laudisi serious when he suggests that Ponza's wife doesn't really exist? Given his joking nature and the way he seems to be forcing the action, it seems as though he isn't. The audience gets the sense that he's making this outlandish suggestion solely to find out just how far the Sirelli crowd will go with their gossipy, judgmental voyeurism. We get the sense that in spite of their arguments to the contrary, several members of the crowd are intrigued by the idea, almost to the point of buying into it. This means that in making the suggestion, Laudisi is yet again making his, and the play's, point, that people are so eager to interpret truths, events and circumstances according to their own agenda that they have no real interest in finding out the truth.

Act 3, Part 2

Act 3, Part 2 Summary

The Prefect comes in, greets Agazzi, Sirelli and Laudisi and comments on how excited everyone seems to be over the relatively small matter of Ponza and his family. He explains that Ponza pleaded with him to see Signora Frola in her own home with the hope that if he did, all the excitement would die down. He adds that Ponza wouldn't have done it if he hadn't been absolutely certain that his view is the right one. Agazzi and Sirelli try several different tactics to persuade him that Signora Frola is being unfairly treated, but the Prefect continues to say he believes Ponza. He then asks Laudisi what he thinks. Laudisi says he's been trying to talk sense to people, adding that it was his idea that the Prefect be brought into the situation. He then says that both the Prefect's belief in Ponza and the beliefs of the others in Signora Frola are perfectly reasonable. Before the Prefect can respond, Agazzi jumps in and angrily says the only way to resolve the situation once and for all is to have the Prefect speak with Ponza's wife to find out what the true situation is. The Prefect says he believes Ponza would have no objection, saying that Ponza above all wants the situation to be over. He tells Centuri to fetch Ponza, who is apparently visiting Signora Frola.

As Centuri goes out, the Prefect says he'll order Ponza to summon his wife to Agazzi's house. Agazzi argues that it's not fair, and Sirelli says it's completely fair. The Prefect insists his way is the right way. Centuri returns with Ponza, who seems agitated. Upon seeing the Prefect, he immediately offers his resignation, saying he's being persecuted and that both he and Signora Frola are deeply upset. Agazzi says he just saw Signora Frola, and she seemed perfectly calm. Ponza protests again that he's being persecuted. The Prefect tells him to calm down and reminds him that everyone is only interested in the welfare of both him and Signora Frola. He goes on to say that it's only natural for people to be confused by the stories they tell and suggests he bring in Ponza's wife to settle the matter. Ponza refuses outright, and the Prefect tells him that by refusing, he's discrediting himself. Agazzi says he discredited himself when he refused to allow Signora Frola to see Amalia and Dina.

Ponza again refuses to allow his wife to be brought in and again offers his resignation. The Prefect tells him he has no right to refuse and that Ponza's making the Prefect doubt his honesty. There can be no possible harm in allowing Ponza's wife to speak, says the Prefect, and if Ponza refuses to bring her to the house, the Prefect will go to her. Ponza reluctantly agrees, but then he asks whether it will be possible for his wife to come without Signora Frola seeing her. He appears to be afraid that seeing his wife will upset Signora Frola. As the Prefect and Agazzi debate what to do, Ponza decides for himself, saying he'll bring his wife and keep an eye on Signora Frola himself. As he runs out, the Prefect says he wasn't expecting quite so much anger. Agazzi suggests that Ponza will tell his wife exactly what to say, but the Prefect says he'll make sure to ask the right questions. He, Sirelli, Agazzi and even Centuri argue about why Ponza keeps

his wife locked up, doesn't keep servants and doesn't allow even delivery boys in the house.

A loud clamor of voices is heard offstage, and Amalia rushes in to announce that Signora Frola has come, even though no one invited her. The Prefect tells her to send Signora Frola away, but before Amalia can go out, Signora Frola comes in, pleading to be allowed to stay. When she sees the Prefect is there, she says she was coming to see him anyway and explains that she's planning to leave town and never come back. Agazzi explains that they didn't want to send her away for good, only for a while because Ponza is coming. Signora Frola realizes her mistake and says she'll go to her own apartment, but before she goes, she asks everyone to leave her and Ponza alone. Even though the people think they're helping Ponza and Signora Frola, she says, they're really hurting them both deeply. Becoming increasingly emotional, she asks what the Prefect wants to see Ponza for. He speaks reassuringly, and Amalia starts to lead Signora Frola out. Signora Frola begins to weep, and the Prefect loses his patience and tells her again that they only want her to leave the room, not the town. Signora Frola says she's afraid everyone is trying to hurt Ponza. The Prefect says he'll look after him, saying he understands that the current situation is the result of a long-ago misfortune. Signora Frola reacts with relief, saying nobody is being harmed by the way they're living and that if the Prefect doesn't tell everyone else to leave her and her family alone, she'll have to leave town and never see her daughter again.

A woman dressed all in black and wearing a heavy veil appears. Signora Frola cries out the name of her daughter and rushes to her. At the same moment, Ponza appears and cries out the name of his second wife. He then shouts at the Prefect and the others, accusing them of betraying him. The Woman in Black, Signora Ponza, tells him to be calm and then tells both him and Signora Frola to leave. Signora Frola embraces Ponza, and together they go out, both weeping.

Signora Ponza tells the Prefect and the others that there can be nothing else learned from her, saying that in the heart of their lives is something that must remain secret for their love for each other to remain. The Prefect pleads with her to tell the truth. Signora Ponza says the truth is that she is Signora Frola's daughter, that she is also the second wife of Signor Ponza and that in terms of herself, she is nobody. She then goes out, adding that ultimately she is whoever the others choose to have her be. After a long silence, Laudisi says that the truth has just appeared. He asks whether everyone is satisfied and then laughs and laughs and laughs.

Act 3, Part 2 Analysis

The momentum of the first part of the act continues to build in this latter part, climaxing in the appearance of Signora Ponza. Incidents like the unexpected appearances of Signora Frola and Ponza and the increasingly emotional arguments the Prefect has with each of them are the prime contributors to this escalation of dramatic tension. The unspoken eagerness of the Sirelli crowd to finally learn the truth provides a powerful and equally energized subtext.

The play's theme, relating to the selfish focus and intent of the gossipy and judgmental, is defined through two small but telling situations. The first is the Prefect's autocratic insistence that the way he's handling the situation is the right way, and the second is Agazzi's reference to the way the whole situation would have been avoided if his wife and daughter had been greeted properly. What the audience sees is that in the middle of the very intense personal drama that's going on, these two petty officials are still concerned with their own power, status, reputation and treatment. Once again, selfishness and self-centeredness are revealed to be at the core of the play's dramatic and thematic premises, warning against self-centeredness and being judgmental.

As previously mentioned, the appearance of Signora Ponza is the play's climax, its thematic and dramatic high point. There are several important aspects to her appearance. The first is the way she's greeted by Signora Frola and Ponza, who each react in the way the other says they will react. Ponza has said that Signora Frola thinks the woman is her daughter, and Signora Frola has said that Ponza thinks the woman is his second wife. That's what we see. Once again, we are presented with a paradox, a situation referred to by Signora Ponza herself. Signora Ponza can't possibly be both women. Because Ponza has acted in a way that supports Signora Frola's beliefs, i.e. pretending to be mad, we're forced to ask ourselves whether either Signora Frola or Ponza or both could be pretending in the same way. Are their actions here real or assumed for the benefit of the other? Is one of them telling the truth and the other deluded? Are they both deluded? The audience doesn't know. There's now way to know. In this moment the play's sense of paradox becomes its defining sensibility, the overwhelming sense that there is no way that true, deep, ultimate truth can ever be known. This paradox is embodied by Signora Ponza, the second important aspect to her appearance - her symbolic value.

Signora Ponza is the most significant symbol in the play, representing not only the particular unknowable paradoxical truth at the heart of the relationship between Ponza and Signora Frola, but also the general unknowability of both truth and life in general. This becomes clear in her exit line, in which Signora Ponza refers to her identity as being defined by whatever people see her as or want her to be. Her phrasing is a clear and deliberate echo of Laudisi's earlier statements about truth's subjective nature. At this point, the play takes a turn from being purely satirical to a rather profound statement on human nature. It becomes, as the playwright himself says in a subtitle, a parable. Her appearance in black and the fact that she's veiled reinforce this idea, suggesting both that she is grieving because humanity is unable and unwilling to face her and that she is in essence a mystery, that it's impossible to face her. In short, in her final lines and in Laudisi's laughter as the curtain falls, the audience sees that being able to live and comprehend truth is impossible to the point of being a joke.

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Characters

Amalia Agazzi

Amalia is wife to Agazzi and sister to Laudisi. She and her daughter Dina feel rebuffed by Signora Frola because she does not answer the door or return their visit when they call on her. Their interest in the gossip about Signora Frola is part human concern, but mostly provincial curiosity. Signora Agazzi enjoys and is quite comfortable with the prestige that comes of being wife to the councilor.

Commendatore Agazzi

Agazzi is a provincial councilor, or lawyer, husband to Amalia, Laudisi's sister. Agazzi is close to fifty years old, accustomed to the authority of his status in a small town. He participates fully in gossiping about Signora Frola and Ponzo.

Dina Agazzi

Dina, at nineteen, acts very grown up about her role in detecting the true details of gossip.

Centuri

Centuri is the Police Commissioner who is brought in to investigate the history of Ponzo, Ponzo's wife, and his mother-in-law. He is around forty, very serious, and single-minded about his duties. He presents his findings with an air of having solved the mystery, failing, however, to comprehend that facts are insignificant in this case. He is quite relieved to be given the duty to call in his superior, the Prefect, since that puts him once again in the realm of concrete action.

Signora Cini

Signora Cini is one of the ladies of the town, an old woman with affected manners and an air of surprise about the misdeeds she loves to hear of in others. She, along with Signora Nenni and the Sirellis operate similarly to the Greek chorus, as a group of normal citizens who react to the events of the play. Unlike the Greek chorus, however, they do not guide the audience, but rather serve as a foil to the audience's hoped-for reaction.

Commisioner

See Centuri

Signora Frola

Signora Frola is the mysterious older woman who is stationed in a fashionable apartment by her son-in-law. The townspeople cannot decide whether to believe her or her son-in-law. Either she is quite mad, delusional about her dead daughter, or quite sane, and foolishly going along with Ponza's delusions, and thus play-acting at being insane, to mollify his insanity. Her pleas to be left alone are ignored.

Governor

See The Prefect

Lamberto Laudisi

Laudisi ("Nunky" to Dina, because he is her uncle) good-naturedly plays the devil's advocate in the gossip ring, using a Socratic kind of probing and jibing. He tries but fails to convince the others of the futility of discovering the truth about Ponza and his mother-in-law. He tells the Sirellis from the very beginning that they are both right, explaining that he himself "is a different person for each of [them]." When they think they have solid data in the form of Centuri's investigative report, he proves to them that it is ambiguous (*which* Signora Frola was in a sanitarium?) and hints that the record may have been forged. He encourages them to bring in the wife for questioning, then laughs when her appearance complicates, rather than solves, the mystery. He acts as a *raisonneur,* a character who, in contrast to the others, behaves reasonably and makes sense of the messy facts; he is similar to Sherlock Holmes in this respect. He is also the alter ego of the playwright, who has fashioned a puzzle and withholds the conventional solution. His solution is a meta-solution, aimed not at solving the problem, but at endowing a better appreciation for awareness itself.

Signora Nenni

Signora Nenni is another town gossip, similar to Signora Cini, who comes in toward the end of the play.

Nunky

See Lamberto Laudisi

Ponza

Ponza is the new secretary to the town's prefect, recently moved to town with lodgings for himself and wife, and a separate apartment for his mother-in-law. He presents a mystery to the townspeople, because he stays away from them and keeps his wife concealed in their fifth-story apartment, yet pays daily visits to his mother-in-law without allowing her to visit his wife, her daughter. Ponza's dark, swarthy complexion and nervous demeanor undermine his credibility, but his version of things competes well enough with Signora Frola's version to confuse the townspeople completely. He claims that his first wife is dead, and that he keeps his deluded mother-in-law away from his second wife to protect the latter from the mother's caresses. He claims to feign craziness as a way of soothing his mother-in-law.

Signora Ponza

Ponza's wife appears in the very last scene, dressed in mourning, and heavily veiled in black. After Ponza and his mother-in-law stumble weeping out of the room, affected by the wife's public appearance, Signora Ponza announces that she is daughter to Signora Frola, wife to Ponza, and to herself, "nobody." This last statement throws uncertainty on everything that has been conjectured and verified about her, since it implies that she has allowed herself to be formed by others, and thus she cannot be speaking "the truth." As such, she is the perfect emblem of Laudisi's theory that every person is exactly as others perceive her to be; however she undermines even his theory too, in denying his corollary at the same time, that she is still herself.

The Prefect

The Prefect, Ponza's superior, and the person of highest rank in the town, is called in to mediate the gossip crisis, which he will do by interrogating Signora Ponza himself. He is about sixty, competent, and good-natured, and perfectly confident in his ability to take charge and set things aright. However, he has to threaten Ponza with dismissal to force him to bring in his wife. Up to this point, the Prefect has trusted Ponza, but even his trust also is undermined by a surfeit of information.

Sirelli

A pretentious and overdressed provincial who, with his wife, gets into the thick of the gossip ring.

Signora Sirelli

Signora Sirelli is a provincial gossip, young and pretty, who cannot understand Laudisi's demonstration that she can be many things to many people. Her argument is that she is "always the same, yesterday, today, and forever!"

Themes

Relativism

Relativism is the theory that "truth and moral values are not absolute but are [pertinent] to the persons or groups holding them" *(American Heritage Dictionary, 3rd Edition)*. The idea of relativism is a core concept of 20th century modernism. At the turn of the century, it was a new idea, just gaining coinage. It followed on the crisis of faith that had occurred during the nineteenth century, spurred on by Darwin's discoveries. Relativism suggests that rather than seek an overarching, absolute truth, such as that previously held forth by the Church, each person might in his or her own conscious discover a relevant truth. At the end of the nineteenth century, philosophers like Matthew Arnold theorized that the way to make the conscious "worthy" of such responsibility was to cultivate genius, to fill the mind with "the best that has been known and said in the world" (as Arnold phrased it in 1873). But who would arbitrate what was the best? The two dimensions of this idea, what was right, and how much weight the conscious could bear, became the burning questions that attended the theory of relativism. Artists and writers tried out the new theory in different contexts, plumbing its depths and testing its fit. So did Pirandello. In an 1893 essay called "Art and Consciousness Today," he wrote,

In minds and consciousnesses an extraordinary confusion reigns. In their interior mirror the most disparate figures, all in disordered attitudes, as if weighed down with insupportable burdens, are reflected, and each gives a different counsel. To whom should we listen? To whom should we cling? The insistence of one counsel overrides for a moment the voices of all the others, and we give ourselves to him for a time with the unhealthy impulsiveness of someone who wants an escape and doesn't know where it is we feel bewildered, lost in an immense, blind labyrinth surrounded on all sides by impenetrable mystery. There are many paths, but which is the true one? The old norms have crumbled, and the new ones haven't arisen and become well established. It's understandable that the idea of the relativity of all things has spread so much within us to deprive us almost altogether of the faculty for judgement.

The term "relativity" does not appear directly in Pirandello's play *Right You Are, If You Think You Are,* but it undergirds its plot, placing it in the context of perceptions about other persons. Amalia, Dina, Agazzi and the others are obsessed with finding the absolute truth about Sigonora Frola and Ponza. But an earthquake has destroyed their past, and they give conflicting stories. Laudisi accepts relativism; he is modern, a man in tune with new ideas. None of the other characters is "ready" to accept that there is no absolute truth. Thus Laudisi is a vanguard of modernist thought, while the other characters are blind (or veiled, like the wife at the end of the play) to reality, or rather, realities.

Privacy

Along with the modernist theme of relativism in *Right You Are, If You Think You Are* lies a more conservative theme. Signora Frola makes a heartfelt plea for the townspeople to leave her family in peace. She insists that they do not realize the harm they are doing with their persistent questioning and prying into her family's affairs. Pirandello himself, who was at the time of writing this play suffering from the presence of his severely mentally ill wife in his home, certainly understood the need for privacy and peace. His wife Antonietta exhibited paranoia and severe jealousy, and her outbursts embarrassed Pirandello, who was shy and reserved. He therefore cloistered himself from prying eyes, and fabricated reasons for his many separations from his wife, when either she left him or drove him and the children away from their home. Everyone in *Right You Are, If You Think You Are* except for Laudisi (the playwright's alter ego) commits the social crime of overstepping the boundaries of conventional propriety in asking questions of Signora Frola and Ponza. The truth is not even revealed to the audience, as if forcing their respect for privacy. Although moralist plays were no longer fashionable in 1917, Pirandello's play is moralist in the sense that it conveys the theme of respecting personal privacy as a maxim of proper human relations.

Style

Parable

Parables, like the stories told by Christ in the *Bible*, are simple stories designed to teach a lesson. The simple, flat characters and rather thin plot serve to illustrate an important idea. Thus, the characters do not need to seem realistic, nor does the plot need intrinsic interest. In this way, the parable is a kind of allegory, which Coleridge defined as "a translation of abstract notions into picture-language." Pirandello's *Right You Are, If You Think You Are* is a parable in the sense that it is not really about a specific man, Laudisi, who has trouble convincing his family and friends that they cannot discover the real truth about their new neighbors. Rather, it is an illustrative example of the theme that all truth is relative; it is an example of the concept, with multiple reminders (through Laudisi's theorizing) to pay attention to the larger ideas at play, and not the story itself. On another level, the play also addresses the moral, Pirandello's corollary to the principle of relativism, to respect people's privacy, for if there is no absolute truth, then we have no right to judge others according to our truths. It is the modernist version of the biblical moral, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone."

The Raisonneur

In some parables or plays of ideas, a *raisonneur* plays the role of guiding the audience to comprehend a moral or intellectual message. The *raisonneur* must have credibility, which he gains through his actions, words, and attitude, but he can also be playful as he chides the other characters for their blindness to the central idea. Laudisi is the *raisonneur* in *Right You Are, If You Think You Are,* but like the prophet Cassandra of the Greek tragedies, his words of warning are destined to be ignored. In his role of chiding the other characters, Laudisi is also a kind of clown, trickster, or *harlequin* figure, seen as foolish by those who cannot hear his message.

Coup de Theatre

A *coup de theatre* is a surprising and usually unmotivated stroke in a drama that produces a sensational effect; by extension, any piece of claptrap or anything designed solely for effect" (Holman and Harmon *A Handbook to Literature, 6th edition*). The hand thrusting from the grave at the end of the thriller film *Carrie* was a *coup de theatre*; so was Hamlet's sudden stab at the tapestry in his mother's rooms, when he thought he had discovered the King spying on him, but killed Polonius instead. The *coups de theatre* at the ends of each scene in *Right You Are, If You Think You Are* may be less physically dramatic, but they are intellectually dramatic. In the first act, Laudisi's friends and family stand stunned after Signora Frola explains that Ponza's wife is not, after all, her daughter, thus overturning Ponza's explanation that Signora Frola is mad, which had just overturned *her* explanation that Ponza kept her daughter locked up because he

loved her so much. The drama lies in stretching the listener's credibility to the maximum. The townspeople stand in "blank astonishment." At the end of Act Two, "they stand in blank amazement," after Ponza explains that he feigned his insane rage at Signora Frola as a palliative to her insanity. The *coup* here is the ingenuity of Pirandello's tortuous plot construction. At the end of Act Three, the crowd simply looks in "profound silence" at Signora Ponza, who has stunned them all by admitting to being both Signora's daughter and Ponza's second wife. Her bizarre dress and sudden appearance conform to conventionally shocking *coups de theatre*, but once again, Pirandello shows dramatic mastery by not relying on the surprise effect as much as on the unusual intellectual twist that her speech confers on the play's meaning. For someone who came rather late to the theater, Pirandello had a flair for dramatic elements such as the *coup de theatre.*

Historical Context

Pirandello & World War I

World War I raged while Pirandello wrote his play, *Right You Are, If You Think You Are*. Pirandello later said that "It was war that revealed theatre to me. Mine is a theatre of war." War between Germany and France had been considered inevitable since at least 1905, and finally broke out in 1914. What began in a nationalist frenzy soon stalemated in a 350-mile line of trenches where thousands of lives were sacrificed to gain or lost a single mile. Euphoria was replaced by nihilism as it became evident that a whole generation was going to slaughter. To many writers and thinkers, the war was proof of the crisis in consciousness that was separate but intricately linked with the political problems that plagued Europe. Italy joined the war in 1915, and Pirandello's son Stefano enlisted, interrupting his university studies. Stefano was immediately was sent to the front, where he was wounded and taken prisoner. Pirandello's younger son Fausto was called up, but was so weak from an intestinal operation that Pirandello had to intervene to get him released to convalesce; however, Fausto had already contracted tuberculosis. Then Stefano contracted tuberculosis as well. Pirandello lobbied for a trade of prisoners, and the Austrian government demanded three prisoners in return for Stefano. Caught between his patriotic duty and his love for his son, Pirandello refused. Stefano was released at the end of the war. During the war years, with both sons in danger, Pirandello's wife Antonietta, who was already mentally unstable, grew unpredictable and violent. The war years were a time of disillusion and danger to all, but of particular torment for Pirandello. After the war, Pirandello joined the Fascist movement, both because it promised to bring backward Italy into the twentieth century, and because of his desperate need to feel connected as well as his attraction to the allure of revolution and dramatic change. Fascism ultimately disappointed him.

Relativism

It is difficult to place exactly when in time the idea of relativism first took root. Certainly it hit its stride when Einstein published his General Theory of Relativity in 1905, but that event merely gave a scientific example of a way of thinking that already existed; in fact, the term "relativity" was already in use. Further back, Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 started a cataclysmic shift in allegiance away from religion, God was "dead," and the idea of progress became an end to itself. Of course, the idea of progress, too, was already extant at this time, in the form of Imperialism and its notion that growth was necessary for survival. Darwin' s theories seemed to support nineteenth century imperialism, yet were unsettling to his age because they suggested that humankind may not have been destined to rule, but developed power through a random series of trials and error. Even though the human species sat at top of the "Great Chain of Being," humanity's divine sponsorship was called into question. Then Freud came along with his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) and accelerated the sense of displacement, by proving that emotion and unconscious forces were as strong as, if not

stronger than, logic and reason. The confidence of the Age of Enlightenment was eroding, and the self-adulation of the Romantic Age seemed inappropriate. World War I would prove to the Allies that the fittest who survived were not necessary morally better. The "Lost Generation," led by Ernest Hemingway and his friends in Europe, mourned this realization. The acceptance of relativism thus came about more as a slow, layer-by-layer removal of outdated arrogances than as a sudden, bright epiphany. If humans could not put their confidence in god, they could at least put it into their own consciousness, whatever that might be. Consciousness could be the new "god," or rather, gods, since each person's view was different, or relative.

Critical Overview

Right You Are, If You Think You Are opened on June 18, 1917 at the Teatro Olimpia in Milan. Pirandello had sent the script to director Virgilio Talli describing the play as "a parable, which is truly original, new in both its conception and development, and very daring." Talli wrote back saying that although he loved the dialogue, he thought the play might not hold together on stage, that it seemed more suitable to be "enjoyed in solitude," through reading. However, Talli did stage the play, and it won the attention that Pirandello's previous seven plays had not garnered. His success initiated a productive writing period that saw thirteen more Pirandello plays appear over the next six years. Of the debut of *Right You Are*, Pirandello reported in a letter to his son that "it was performed very successfully," and that he was received "very warmly." After a tour of major Italian cities, the play reached Rome the following year, to much acclaim. His popularity increased after the arrival in 1921 of his best-known play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1925), but then waned in Italy a few short years later. A German reviewer of a 1925 production of *Right You Are, If You Think You Are* called it a "terrifying play," in which "both sides were equally crazy and all the other characters held their own in a quiet craziness of their own." Another German reviewer called the play "bluff clever bluff at times but bluff all the same." Nevertheless, Pirandello' s renown in the rest of Europe was firmly established, and the term *Pirandellisme* came to signify his style of dramatic intellectual games.

During the height of his fame, *Right You Are, If You Think You Are* was first played in New York at the Guild Theater February 21, 1927, with Edward G. Robinson as Ponza. Reviewer Stark Young deemed this production " at least passable," for a play with an "exhilarating game of motives and ideas," one that put *Right You Are in a* league with the *commedia dell'arte*, or improvisation with a clown, or harlequin, character. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* hailed it as a good run from "satire to metaphysics and on to melodrama" that is "ingeniously exciting and amusing by turns." Helen Hayes played Signora Frola in a 1966 production at the Lyceum Theater in New York City, following the stage directions and translation of Eric Bentley, again to good acclaim. A 1972 production in New York earned high praise from *New York Post* critic Jerry Tallmer, who especially liked the stage design that included a wall of mirrors to emphasize the shifting perspectives. Clive Barnes considered the same production with less enthusiasm, though he fully approved of Bentley's translation, which he deemed as having "just the right primed and provincial seediness to it."

For many decades scholarly treatments of his work appeared only in Italian, though these were, and continue to be, numerous. The 1950s brought about a revival of his work, as it corresponds well with Existentialism and the Theater of the Absurd. Once the copyright of his works expired and the centenary of his death was celebrated (in 1986), his plays experienced a resurgence in popularity, and since then new anthologies of his works and new volumes of literary criticism in English have appeared with some regularity.

Like George Bernard Shaw, Pirandello felt oppressed by publicity. In 1935, he complained of "the many Pirandellos in circulation in the world of international literary criticism, lame, deformed, all head and no heart, erratic, gruff, insane, and obscure, in whom no matter how hard [he tried, he could not] recognize himself even for a moment." To some, his was an intellectual art, lacking feeling. The term "Pirandellisme," as it was applied to Jean Giraudoux and Jean Anouilh, meant "pure intellectual game," a trait that was much appreciated in French theater. Pirandello objected to this label as suggesting he was merely a "juggler of ideas." It was not until after World War II that audiences appreciated his seriousness.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is an English teacher at Gary Academy, an innovative private school in Gary, North Carolina. In this essay she examines the themes of privacy and relative truth in Right You Are, If You Think You Are, especially in light of Pirandello's tormented personal life.

Pirandello' *sRight You Are, If You Think You Are* is one of many of his plays and essays that concerns relativism, a feature of the modern consciousness. Pirandello described his own version of the theory in *Umorismo, [On Humor]* (1908):

Life is a continuous flux that we seek to arrest and to fix in stable and determinate forms, within and outside ourselves But within ourselves, in what we call the spirit the flux continues, indistinct, flowing under the banks, beyond the limits that we impose as we compose a consciousness for ourselves and construct a personality.

Not surprisingly, many critics have focused on the theme of relativism as it appears in *Right You Are, If You Think You Are.* The play concerns "flux" of shifting truths in the several explanations that Ponza and Signora Frola proclaim about Signo-ra Ponza. Each of their revelations supercedes the last, and each new truth seems final, until the next one is presented. For example, Signora Frola's story that Ponza keeps her away from her daughter out of love melts away when Ponza explains that she is insanely perpetuating a myth that her daughter is alive. With each turn of events, it is as though the solid background of the theater gives way to another curtain, and then, impossibly, to another.

Against the overlaying of multiple truths, Laudisi, Pirandello's alter ego in the play, insists that all of the explanations are simultaneously true, and thus there is no ultimate truth to uncover. To prove his case he tells them, "I am really what you take me to be; though that does not prevent me from also being really what your husband, my sister, my niece, and Signora Cini take me to be because they are all absolutely right!" Each perspective is "right" in its own way, although incomplete. The friends and family ignore him, however, and continue their quest for the ultimate truth. In doing so, they fail to grasp the metaphysical truth that Laudisi represents and that underpins the play. Thus on one level, Pirandello's play simply illustrates his theory of multiple coexisting truths, i.e., relativism, and its consequences.

Relativism's effect on human relations, Pirandello's play suggests, leads to frustration, because humans continue to search for absolute truth. As Anthony Caputi points out in *Pirandello and the Crisis of Modern Consciousness,* the play also concerns itself with "the implications of living with fictions created with a full awareness that they are fictions." When people understand, with Laudisi, that truth is relative, they feel unmoored, lacking the comforting anchor of absolute truth. The sensation can be as unsettling as madness, and so Laudisi asks his image in the mirror, "Who is the lunatic, you or I?" He goes on, "What are you for other people? What are you in their eyes? An image, my dear sir, just an image in the glass!" In other words, relativism reduces truth

to a play of surfaces, where conflicting interpretations compete for viability in a world that refuses to offer confirmation. The family and friends base their assessment of Ponza and Signora Frola on their explanations, which they cannot verify because Signora Ponza is hidden away and an earthquake has destroyed the family's documents. As a last resort, the townspeople force a confrontation between Ponza and Signora Frola, to force the truth out. But the confrontation proves no more fruitful than Laudisi's conversations with his mirror image. This is because the problem lies not in the facts or words, but within themselves. Laudisi laughs, "'What fools these mortals be!' as old Shakespeare said." As Pirandello's spokesperson indicates, the problems of relativism are personal, and therefore it is necessary to consider Pirandello's personal relationship to the theme of relativism. In doing so, the related moral theme of respect for human privacy becomes paramount.

Drama critic and director Eric Bentley notes in *The Pirandello Commentaries* that Pirandello is not simply interested in the philosophy of relativism, but in the moral dilemma that accompanies it. He asserts that, "the play is not about thinking, but about suffering, a suffering that is only increased by those who give understanding and enquiry precedence over sympathy and help." Suffering is a thread that quietly winds its way through the play. Signora Frola and her family are mourning the effects of losing many members of their family, and under these condictions, the townspeople's insistent questioning is "cruel." Although they accuse Ponza of cruelty and selfishness, they are blind to the cruelty they impose on her, in their relentless crusade to uncover her truths. In the end of Act Three, Signora Ponza cries, "You must stop all this. You must let us alone. You think you are helping me. You are trying to do me a favor; but really, what you're doing is working me a great wrong." According to Bentley, a key detail is the fact that in spite of their efforts, the truth about Signora Ponza never comes to light. Bentley emphatically says, "The truth, Pirandello wants to tell us again and again, is concealed, *concealed*, CONCEALED!" It is as though Pirandello is demonstrating not that truth is impossible to perceive, tricky or shifting, but that it is, and should be, private. Bentley concludes, "The solution of the problem, the cure for these sick human beings, is to leave their problem unsolved and unrevealed."

The theme of suffering at the hands of nosy gossips could easily derive from Pirandello's tormented life. From an insane wife who tormented him with her jealous rages to his own obsessive dependency on her and then on a much younger actress, Pirandello's personal life was something he needed to obscure from public view. Former students of his attest to a man who "always kept to himself," who cared to befriend neither his students nor his colleagues. Perhaps he was ashamed of his marriage. In catholic Italy, divorce was impossible, as was abandonment, especially since he felt he could not live without his wife, despite her madness. To ease the agony, he wrote about it. In his novel, *Her Husband*, he describes a man tormented as "the target of madness" from a wife who "knew nothing of his ideal life, his superior talents" but only saw "the phantom she had made of him." He was "two people: one for himself, another for her." Perhaps there was, too, a side of Pirandello that aggravated her madness, or that somehow thrived on it. Most biographers cast Pirandello as the victim of his mad wife's behavior. But Renate Matthaei suggests that "His mad wife was an inspiration. She showed him all the symptoms of a disturbance that he recognized in himself but had

managed to conceal, being more robust than she." For years Pirandello managed to conceal his own obsessive nature behind the mask of his wife's madness. He brought it to the light in the relative safety of stories and plays that explored the boundaries of such relationships. In *Right You Are* he plays with various readings of the Ponza-Frola relationship, with killing off the wife, or simply fantasizing her death. It is as though he cannot bear to reach a resolution with it, just as he could not bear to resolve his own marriage's difficulties. It took seventeen years of torment before, with the support of their children, he had her institutionalized. He must have felt both relief and great guilt when he finally took that step.

Not to have made a decision about his wife was a way of keeping all of the options alive, all truths simultaneously true. Bentley is correct to point out that the mystery character's secret truth stays concealed, even at the end of the play when a resolution is fervently expected. Furthermore, Signora Ponza verifies *every* interpretation of her, by claiming to be both wife to Ponza and daughter to Signora Frola, and "nothing" to herself. This final intellectual turn shockingly reveals that Signora Ponza has allowed herself to be molded by her husband. Her veiled existence, a product of other's perspectives of her, makes an eloquent appeal for human privacy. The viewer is left feeling that she should somehow have resisted their interpretations, and kept true to herself, as Pirandello often urged Marta Abba to be. To stay true to oneself is to resist and lock out other people's interpretations so that one's own ideas may survive. In Pirandello's case, he wanted to obscure the realistic appraisals of outsiders, so that they would not interfere with his fantasies. His fantasies occluded a proper assessment of his mad wife, such that he let his family suffer for seventeen years. They also allowed him to burn for ten years in futile passion for an actress half his age.

Pirandello's sentiments concerning truth are given voice by Laudisi, who argues for keeping alive all of the possible interpretations of Ponza, his wife, and his mother-in-law, and their tortuous relations. Laudisi could equally well have been arguing for keeping alive all the fantasies that Pirandello used to negotiate his complex and troubled life. The theory of relativism, for Pirandello, is a means to maintaining his internal fictional world. The play's title, *Right You Are, If You Think You Are*, could be directed at the Laudisi's friends, at Pirandello's friends, or even, at Pirandello himself.

Source: Carole Hamilton, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, Petrusso discusses how social values and the theme of truth shape Right You Are!.

In Luigi Pirandello's *Right You Are! (If You Think So)*, many of the primary characters are on a quest for the truth about newcomers to their community. The Agazzis, Lamberto Laudisi, and their friends want to know several things about Signer Ponza, his wife, and his mother-in-law, Signora Frola. They are curious about the unusual living situation among the Ponzas and Frola, as well as what happened to them in their previous home. This nosy interest leads to much speculation, gossip, and trickery, but the group never really finds out the "real" truth about the Ponzas and Frola. Pirandello shows how relative "truth" can be, and how such an investigation can harm those concerned.

At the end of *Right You Are! (If You Think So)*, the primary protagonists Commendatore Agazzi, his wife Amalia, their daughter Dina, and their friends the Sirellis, among others end up forcing a face-to-face confrontation between Signer Ponza, his wife, and his mother-in-law, Signora Frola, to get at the truth about them. Over the course of the play, it is stated several times that Signora Ponza and Frola have not talked in such a face-to-face manner because of something that happened in the past. The only way the alleged mother and daughter have communicated is by letter. Frola would visit the Ponzas' tenement apartment, and Signora Ponza would drop a basket from her fifth floor balcony for the exchange of notes. Yet the forced meeting does not answer any of the protagonists' questions about the Ponzas and Frola. Signora Ponza tells them that the contradictory stories that Signer and Signora Frola have told them are both true. The previously unseen Signora Ponza solves the play by not solving it, thus giving *Right You Are!* its primary theme: the truth about people differs based on point of view. Much of the time, what is believed to be a truth is irrelevant.

The reason for the protagonists' quest for the truth is understandable. The more they find out about the Ponzas and Frola, the more their interest is piqued. In addition to the letter-only communication between mother and daughter, the Ponzas live in a tenement on the edge of town, while Frola lives in the same upscale building as the Agazzis. Signer Ponza does not want Frola to have a normal social life with anyone, including her neighbors. Yet Frola and Signer Ponza spend much time together. Though Frola manages to have some social contact, her alleged daughter has none at all. No one in the village has seen her outside the home until the end of *Right You Are!,* and the only reason she has been brought there is because the village's Prefect has ordered it.

But what starts the Agazzis, their relatives and friends on their quest is a breach of perceived social mores by Frola. Before this major transgression, it seems the protagonists merely noticed and gossiped about the minor social oddities of the Ponzas and Frola. A major transgression opens a floodgate, and gives the protagonists a license to dig deeper and create confrontational situations. This transgression is Frola's refusal to receive the social call of Signora Agazzi and her daughter Dina just before the

action of Act I begins. This infuriates Signora Agazzi and Dina because, as Signora *Agazzi* states, "We were trying to do her a favor." The truth becomes important to them because of their values. Their social mores must be upheld, and the only way to do that is to discover the truth. The truth would explain why Frola refused to (or was not allowed to) receive them, which would allow the social mistake to be acceptable.

Nothing less than what the protagonists perceive to be the truth will do to counteract this social misstep by Frola. They go to great lengths to find out the truth, without respect for the privacy of the Ponzas and Frola or other social mores. Some of their group goes as far as to call for the firing of Ponza from his governmental job based on speculation and rumor, even before explanations can be given by Ponza and Frola. Like the truth at the end of *Right You Are!*, social graces are portrayed as relative, at least for established citizens of the village.

Thus when Frola calls upon the Agazzis in Act I to apologize and relate her story, they conveniently deny their already stated abhorrence of her social transgression so that more information can be obtained. Signora Agazzi herself says, "Oh, we are just neighbors, Signora Frola! Why stand on ceremony?" This statement comforts Frola and makes her more open to answering their questions. Frola tells them about an earthquake in which she and Ponza lost their families, which should sufficiently explain away why they act differently. But the group gathered push Frola to the limit with their persistent, torturous questions. There is no regard for sociability here. The group cannot accept Frola's feeble explanations nor her statements of happiness. When she says, "We all have our weaknesses in this world, haven't we! And we get along best by having a little charity, a little indulgence for one another," they ignore her implied plea and decide to dig deeper for a more "real," socially acceptable truth.

Soon after Frola leaves in Act I, Ponza makes a social call to the Agazzis and relates his version of events to counteract anything Frola may have said. Ponza is flustered and controlling, explaining that Frola must be left alone. When the group does not like this, Ponza reveals that she is insane. He claims that he was married to Frola's daughter at one time, but she died and the woman he is married to now is his second wife. Frola has mistaken the second wife for her own daughter, and lives in obsessed denial about who the woman Ponza is married to really is. This is Ponza's reason for essentially keeping Frola under lock and key, and not allowing social mores to be followed. Some of the group of protagonists accepts most of this explanation, while others are not so sure.

Their quest for truth takes another unexpected turn when Frola returns. She tells them that while Ponza is an excellent worker, he is the one who is a lunatic. Frola's version of the story is that her daughter became ill with a contagious disease and had to be isolated and hospitalized. Ponza believed that his wife had died in the hospital, and when she recovered, he would not believe it was her. A second wedding was held for the couple, so Ponza still believes that Frola's daughter is dead. Frola assures them that this is the only way Ponza can survive his day-to-day life. She also says that she pretends to be insane for his benefit. As Frola tells the group during her second visit, "Oh, my dear Signora Agazzi, I wish I had left things as they were. It was hard to feel

that I had been impolite to you by not answering the bell when you called the first time; but I could never have supposed that you would come back and force me to call upon you."

Throughout Acts II and III, the group of protagonists, led by the Agazzis, try to discern the truth of these statements: Who is really insane, Frola or Ponza? Which is telling the truth about their past? The quest for the truth only gets more confusing, not less. When they resort to trickery in Act II, they find out that Frola calls Signora Ponza by the name of Julia, while Ponza insists that her name is Lena. They end up hurting Ponza desperately. The group also arranges for a background investigation by the police which leads nowhere. Their quest ends in the manner described above, by involving the town's Prefect and arranging a confrontation between all three which does nothing to fulfill their need to know. When forced, the mysterious Signora Ponza asks of the group, "And what can you want of me now, after all this, ladies and gentlemen?" What the group wanted was a clear truth so they could judge the social acceptability of the Ponzas and Frola. What emotional damage and distress they caused in their explanation was irrelevant, though that is also a breach of social mores.

There is one voice of reason in *Right You Are!*, Signora Agazzi's brother, Lamberto Laudisi. Though he is aligned with the group of protagonists, he is a skeptic who questions their every statement, every motive, and every move. Laudisi sees the narrowness of their vision, how they perceive that everything must be true or false, with no other possible explanation. From the beginning of the play, he says things like "It was none of your damned business" when Dina *Agazzi* tried to rationalize their visit to Frola. Laudisi is aware of the importance of privacy, and implicitly sees how the group is using social mores to further their quest. He tries to show them the futility of their task, but he is ridiculed, and, at one point, banned from the room. Still, he maintains a sense of humor which serves him well. And at the end of each act, including the end of *Right You Are!*, Laudisi gets the last laugh because he has known the truth about their "real" truth all along.

Source: A. Petrusso, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

The following is Dombroski's aim in this essay: "Rather than interpreting Laudisi's laughter as a sign of Pirandello's satirical aims, I should like to suggest the possibility of viewing it simply as a spontaneous show of approval for a humorous situation, a favorable response to a rather elaborate joke."

Criticism has more or less agreed that Pirandello's intention in writing *Right You Are (If You Think So)* was to illustrate his conviction that truth does not exist absolutely, but merely as a product of the individual mind. From here it became a question of whether the play was successful as drama and to what extent the thesis may be said to either enhance or diminish the work's emotional content. Is *Right You Are* a "sensitive" and "provoking" expression of Pirandello's philosophy? Or is it nothing more than as Gramsci would have it "a superficial fact of literature: a pure and simple mechanical aggregate of words"? (*AVANTH,* Oct. 5, 1917) Contemporary criticism has rescued the play from a type of discussion based on whether Pirandello did or did not succeed in dramatizing his relativist *Weltanschauung* by shifting the perspective from the work's philosophical content to its social bearings and the existential turmoil of its main characters; that is, from Laudisi's arid reasoning about the relativity of truth to the sufferings of the Ponza-Frola group. Eric Bentley, for example, views the play as a social satire, Pirandello's aim being to demonstrate how the "idle curiosity" and "nosi-ness" of the townspeople is detrimental to the sufferers' struggle for life in its inner essence and private depths. And Robert Brustein goes a step further, describing the work as a "drama of social revolt." According to him, "the play is a protest against [he quotes Bentley] the 'scandalmonger, the prying reporter, and the amateur psychoanalyst' and [he himself adds] the sob sister, the candid cameraman, and the Congressional investigator those who recklessly probe the secrets of others."

For Bentley and Brustein, therefore, the drama consists in the play's emotional content, that is, in Signora Frola's and Signer Ponza's struggle for survival against the onslaught of the townspeople's destructive curiosity. Although convincing in many ways and certainly supported by the characters' awareness of conflict, interpretations of this sort do not take sufficiently into account the function of the "intellectual" frame in which the drama develops: they focus on the dramatic or dialectical process as if this process were free from the imposing presence of Laudisi and thus ignore the importance of the relationship between structural elements in determining the play's total meaning.

Those readers to whom *Right You Are* appeared as too intellectually contrived had good reasons on which to base their assumptions. For it is clear that the conflict between the townspeople and the Ponza-Frola group is a dramatic actualization of Laudisi's relativist convictions. From the standpoint of the play's thematic organisation *Right You Are* appears unequivocally as a *dramma a tesi*. It begins simply with man's natural desire to know the things around him (the townspeople's wanting to understand the reasons for the Ponza-Frola group's strange living arrangement). It concludes with the discovery that things have not an absolute, but a relational existence (the meaning of Signora Ponza' s final words "Io sono colei che mi si crede"). The play develops in a way that the

thesis is proved in each of the acts and in the final act it becomes impossible to disprove. From the standpoint of action, the reader follows a circular schema whereby he sees the townspeople move from a state of unsatisfied curiosity through several intense moments of expectation and disillusionment back to that same state; while thematically he proceeds from the lack of knowledge through a series of demonstrations to the awareness that truth beyond appearance is unattainable. In addition to Laudisi and Signora Ponza, who express their relativist beliefs directly to the townspeople, Signora Frola and Signer Ponza illustrate perfectly Pirandello's thesis: they both tell equally convincing stories and each is aware of the role the other is playing.

At the same time, however, the play's emotional nucleus does consist in the struggle of the PonzaFrola group to preserve their illusions, although we may sincerely wonder if this theme could not have been expressed in a less mechanical way. Is the character of Laudisi really necessary to the drama? Why did Pirandello choose such an "unrealistic" story to illustrate his convictions? It might be that the artist is at fault. Professor Brustein believes that Pirandello, by not fusing the "spokesman-sufferer " (Laudisi) with the pathetic sufferers (the Ponza-Frola group), has not yet perfected his dramatic structure. But the work's flawless technique suggests that Pirandello has willingly created an ambiguous dramatic structure, which in itself is perfect. The ambiguity lies in the figure of Laudisi who, on the one hand, tells us that truth is equal to appearance and laughs at those who seek "objective facts," and on the other, goes no further than showing abstract sympathy for the sufferings of the Ponza-Frola family. That is to say, Laudisi relates to Signora Frola and Signer Ponza through his episte-mological considerations which are potentially beneficial to their lives. But his involvement in their drama ends there. He does not, for instance, act directly to help them; nor does he voice more than mild objections at the townspeople's tactics. Thus, as an element of structure, Laudisi does not have the status of a character belonging to one of the dialectical forces in the play. Rather he is a sort of device whose function lies in establishing the emotional and intellectual relationships between the playwright and the dialectical oppositions he is representing.

The role of Laudisi in *Right You Are* may be better understood if we consider for a moment the short story on which the play is based, *"La signora Frola e il signor Ponza suo genero"* (1915). The story is related by an anonymous speaker in the form of a dramatic monologue. The speaker of the monologue addresses an audience of readers, telling them how the entire citizenry of Valdana is perplexed at not being able to distinguish which of the two eccentric strangers, Mrs. Frola or Mr. Ponza, has gone mad. The speaker then goes on to recount the events (repeated for the most part in the play) leading to the townspeople's suspicion that "reality is just as bad as fantasy, and that every reality can quite well be fantasy and vice versa." Ulrich Leo, in a well known article, has argued convincingly that the "persona" of the monologue may be described as an "embryonic" Laudisi, "a *Laudisi avant la lettre,*" essentially because he utters in direct discourse much of the same Pirandellian epistemology contained in the play. However true this may be, there are perhaps reasons for establishing a more binding relationship between the *raisonneur* of *Right You Are* and the nameless speaker of the story. Laudisi and the speaker of the monologue, in my view, share the same structural peculiarities within the context of their respective genres; and they perform basically the

same function as dramatic devices. Only, in the story, on account of a more elementary structure, the function is more clearly seen and understood. Like Laudisi, the "persona" partakes of the dialectical oppositions in the story and, at the same time, conveys directly the author's thoughts. Pirandello's choice of the dramatic monologue doubtless facilitates this scheme and his use of free indirect discourse makes it possible. In the story's opening sentence, for instance, the speaker states sympathetically the townspeople's chief preoccupation which reappears in the play on the lips of Signora Sirelli:

Well, just imagine whatit's like! It really *is* enough to drive you out of your mind to be completely unable to find out which of these two people is mad ....

SIGNORA SIRELLI. But how can you escape the curiosity we all feel to get to the bottom of this mystery which is enough to drive us all mad?

But he also goes on to speak in behalf of Signora Frola and Signor Ponza, uttering the very words that their counterparts will express in the drama. Here is one of many possible examples:

Oh, no, for pity's sake! He's not cruel! There's just this: he wants her all, he wants that darling little wife all for himself, even to such an extent that her love for her mother, well, he wants it to reach her not directly, but through him, by way of him.

SIGNORA FROLA. Jealous of me, her mother? I don't think you can say that.... You see, he wants his wife's heart all for himself, to the extent that the love which my daughter must have for me, her mother (...). He wants that it should reach me through him, that's it!

In addition, the speaker conveys Pirandello's reaction to the situation by interjecting, from time to time, his thoughts into the monologue, such as, "Even if it is true that they have undergone a terrible disaster, it is nonetheless true that at least one of them has had the good luck to go mad...." The similarities between the anonymous speaker and Laudisi as elements of structure suggest that Laudisi was mainly conceived as personage-replacement for the "persona": that is, as a character-device which betrays, as we shall see, the author's uncertain position with respect to his drama.

When the play begins, the Agazzi household is in a turmoil because Signora Frola, the mother-in-law of Signor Ponza, the new provincial secretary, has not welcomed in her home Agazzi's wife and daughter. The visit has been prompted by their desire to understand why the Ponza-Frola family, having come to town as the sole survivors of an earthquake, should live divided: the man and his wife sharing the top floor of a tenement at the edge of town while the mother lives at her son-in-law's expense in a fashionable apartment. It is also known that the wife never leaves the tenement and that the mother never sees her face to face. This situation leads to the townspeople's investigation, their aim being to unite mother and daughter according to accepted standards of social behaviour.

Immediate suspicion as to who is at fault falls on Signer Ponza, and Signora Frola confirms the people's assumption, stating that she lives separated from her daughter because of Ponza's need for absolute possession of his wife. She adds, however, that she is in perfect agreement with the arrangement and that by living this way the family is very happy. Signora Frola having exited, Ponza himself enters to vouch for the fact that it was he who prevented his mother-in-law from carrying out her social obligations. The reason is because Signora Frola is mad. Her madness he says consists in her believing that her daughter is alive, when in fact she has been dead for several years. The mother is therefore deluded in thinking that the husband's second wife is actually her daughter. Her illusion, nevertheless, must be preserved in order that she not suffer from the truth. Now public opinion has shifted in Ponza's favor, but not for long. Signora Frola, aware of her son-in-law's version of the story, returns to tell the townspeople that it is really Ponza who is deluded. His love for his wife she explains was so overpowering that it was necessary for reasons of health to commit her to a sanatorium. Ponza, thinking she was dead, would no longer accept her as his wife. To reunite the couple a second wedding had to be staged. Ponza's wife, therefore, according to the mother, is really her daughter who, in order not to unmask her husband's beneficial illusion, pretends to be his second wife. At this point, after having heard two equally plausible, but contradictory accounts of why the family must live divided, the astonished townspeople stand looking at each other, while Laudisi, who all along has argued that there is no key to the mystery, has a hearty laugh at their expense.

In the second act, the dialectical pattern repeats itself. Disappointed because there are no documents to prove who is telling the truth, Agazzi plans to have Ponza and Frola meet face to face, believing that the encounter would force the hand of one of them. It appears, in fact, to be the case when the husband becomes furiously angry with the mother and tries to convince her before the others that his wife is not her daughter. But as soon as the mother leaves, his rage subsides. He was just pretending to be mad in order to verify her impression of him. Once again the spectators remain dumbfounded and once again Laudisi bursts out laughing.

In the final act, the pattern is repeated again. Now the townspeople have no other recourse than to call the wife to unravel the mystery. Signora Ponza, however, is of little help to them. She confesses that she is both Signora Frola's daughter and Signer Ponza's second wife and that for herself she is nobody. Now thoroughly foiled in their quest for *the* truth, Agazzi and Co. stand baffled as Laudisi's laughter once again fills the stage.

Inasmuch as Laudisi functions as a *raisonneur,* he shares the playwright's convictions and states them as universal premises, i.e. truth is equal to appearance. But more important is the fact that he reacts as a spectator to the dramatic events by laughing in every crucial moment of the play's development. His recurring laughter, I believe, is a clear sign of the way Pirandello himself interprets his drama, and only through an understanding of the psychology of his laughter can we arrive at an understanding of Pirandello's point of view.

Laudisi's laughter is generally seen as being "caustically sardonic," intended to deride the phil-istine attitudes and pretentions of the townspeople and thus viewed as an expression of "social revolt." To quote again Robert Brustein:

Pirandello exercises [in *Right You Are*] the animus of his social revolt; and the tragedy which threatens is averted at the end. Their right to privacy affirmed, their secret still hidden from the gossips and busybod-ies, *th&pharmakoi* [the pathetic sufferers] depart into darkness, while the *alazones* [buffoons] stand lost in amazement, whipped by the savage laughter of the *eiron* [sufferer-spokesman].

One possible objection to this view is the lack of textual evidence that might reveal the "sardonic" quality of Laudisi's laughter. On the contrary, although the stage directions do not divulge the nature of his laughter ("Laudisi," Pirandello indicates simply, "Scoppiera a ridere Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!"), the dialogue between him and his family clarifies his attitude toward their actions as being somewhat less than contemptuous. Like Pirandello, Laudisi is sympathetic to human foibles. His manner of reacting to the townspeople's naivete is at most benevolently ironical, as when he tells them:

I enjoy hearing you talk. I'll be quiet, don't fear. At the very most, I shall indulge in a laugh or two, and if I really burst out laughing, please forgive me.

In other words, Laudisi amuses himself at their expense, laughing when reality proves to be at odds with their ambitions. This sort of relationship between the author's spokesman and his would-be antagonists would seem inappropriate in a dramatic context where the message is one of either social or existential revolt. Rather than interpreting Laudisi's laughter as a sign of Pirandello's satirical aims, I should like to suggest the possibility of viewing it simply as a spontaneous show of approval for a humorous situation, a favorable response to a rather elaborate joke.

Laudisi's laughter alone does not establish sufficiently the presence in the play of a joke pattern, for the acid test of a joke is not whether it provokes laughter or not. What does, however, is his awareness of a humorous situation:

AGAZZI. Some of the talk had reached him [the Prefect] and even he feels that it's time to clear up this mystery, so that we shall know the truth.

LAUDISI. [*bursts out laughing*] Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!

AMALIA. All we need now is for you to laugh.

AGAZZI. And why is he laughing?

SIGNORA SIRELLI. Because he says that no one can ever know the truth!

The joke implied in this instance is that the townspeople know the truth already, since whatever seems to each of them true is true.

Translated into terms compatible with Pirandello's reflections on humor, Laudisi's laughter would derive from his perception of something incongruous ("L'avvertimento del contrario"): that is, he laughs because the townspeople make fools of themselves by trying to control logically something uncontrollable and, in doing so, appear ludicrously distorted, frozen in their futile ambition. Bergson would say that Laudisi has perceived something mechanical encrusted on something living (for Pirandello, *Form* imposed on *Life*), the townspeople thus being automata who threaten to deprive the Frola-Ponza group of its spontaneity and freedom, while Laudisi's actual laughter results from his observing the spiritual rigidity and lifelessness of Agazzi and Co. To Freud the Ponza-Frola group would probably appear as the symbolic expression of the subconscious that has succeeded in breaking down the control imposed on it by the conscious mind, symbolized by the townspeople. Laudisi's laughter in this case would be a sign of freedom experienced in the face of a momentary release of psychic energy.

Regardless of what theory we choose to explain Laudisi's laughter, we are dealing basically with a play on form, an attack on something formal by something informal; the townspeople's established, logically controlled approach to reality is overturned by the vitality and irrationality of the Ponza-Frola group. Why then does the subversion of form not indicate the animus of revolt? The answer lies in the joke form itself which implies that the upsetting of formal values or thought patterns is only *temporary*, and that the laugh it elicits is a sign of *momentary* freedom from the burden of reality. Although Signora Frola and Signer Ponza challenge the accepted pattern of structuring reality throughout the play, they succeed only at the end of each act in tilting the scales in their favor. The joke also implies a congenial relationship between the joker and the societal group in which the joke is told and accepted. Mary Douglas, who has made several studies of jokes and their relationship to social experience, argues that the joker "has a firm hold on his own position in the social structure and the disruptive comments which he makes upon it are in a sense the comments of the social group upon itself. *He merely expresses consensus*. Safe within *the permitted range of attack* he lightens for everyone the oppressiveness of social reality, demonstrates its arbitrariness by making light of formality in general." (Italics mine).

Right You Are (If You Think So) contains three distinct structural elements, two of which (the townspeople and the Ponza-Frola group) represent the terms of the joke pattern; the third (Laudisi) embodies an ideal audience of listeners. Pirandello relates to the townspeople and family through Laudisi, whose rapport with the members of his family and their friends reflects in a sense Pirandello's own position within the social structure of his time. Laudisi is an evolved part of the provincial bourgeois society he ridicules. Aware of the problematic nature of human existence, he challenges the townspeople's claim to objective truth, but rather than offending their values, he is really only causing a nuisance, a minor hindrance to their investigation. In other words, the epistemological relativism that Pirandello conveys through his *raisonneur* is not meant to undermine the social structure represented by Agazzi and Co., but rather to define a drama in which everyone participates: the drama of man's depersonalization, of his life as a role actor on the stage of society. Signora Frola and Signer Ponza literally act out this drama in their conflict with the townspeople. On stage, they perform according to the demands created by the social context. The more accentuated the demands become (the more

the townspeople push ahead in their quest for "truth") the more they challenge each other's role in the face of the investigators, until Signora Ponza, herself the personification of man's identity crisis, arrives to declare that her appearance is her existence: she is whoever she appears to be "Cosi e (se vi pare)." For Pirandello the Frola-Ponza group has a dual function. As dramatic characters they illustrate the crisis of the divided self, while as the major term of the joke pattern they afford the opportunity for realizing that the townspeople's way of structuring reality may be arbitrary and subjective, and therefore without necessity.

As for the townspeople, they exemplify the element of control against which the vital, uncontrolled Ponza-Frola group combats. In their ranks, we can certainly find the busybody or buffoon type: the Signoras Sirelli, Nenni, and Cini, for example, and Agazzi and the Prefect are unquestionably persistent enough to be likened to "congressional investigators," but there are characters such as Amalia and Sirelli who appear more humane and compassionate. Their motives for carrying out the investigation are somewhat less selfish than those of their fellow citizens. On the whole, it is a diversified group representing various types and degrees of curiosity. The character of Laudisi bridges the gap between the two groups. Socially he is one of the townspeople, but in his epistemological reflections, he speaks for the Ponza-Frola family. His laugh is the effect of an exhilarating sense of being liberated from conventional thought patterns. For a moment *Life* has subverted *Form*: the human spirit has been released from the limitations imposed on it by logical discourse.

The social message concealed in *Right You Are (If You Think So)*, as in any joke or humorous situation, is not one of satire or revolt (both of which necessitate contempt for reality, and, at least, an implicit display of objective values); rather what we have can be best described as the mild ridicule a society imposes upon itself as a way of censoring its belief in the objective world constructed by its own reason. *Right You Are* is a play written for a confused, disoriented society, spiritually uprooted by the havoc and catastrophies of war; a society whose members have lost confidence in its institutions and are questioning the rational foundations on which those very institutions are built. It is a play of crisis in which a solution is only hinted at.

With *Henry IV* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello begins to emerge from the structural ambiguity manifested in *Right You Are (If You Think So)*. The momentary liberation from the official categories of thought crystallized in the relationship between Laudisi and the Ponza-Frola group becomes an extended escape that springs from the development of a counter-logic (the logical paradoxes of Laudisi) and terminates in the creation of a new and eternal form of existence. Henry's willed decision to accept as *his* reality the mask of madness indicates his desire to live apart from his social group in the timelessness of history where his identity has already been accounted for as a Holy Roman Emperor. The six characters who wander on to the set of *The Rules of the Game* are in search of an author who will eternalize their masks and thereby confer on their problematic lives the timelessness of art. The elaboration of myth in the dramatist's later phase signals the exasperation of his quest for existential cohesion.

If Right You Are (If You Think So) reflects, as I believe it does, a crisis of values and the consciousness the society has of the crisis, I should like to suggest going a step further to note how the evolution of Pirandello's theater from *Right You Are* to the later plays is analogous to the political and social evolution that took place in Italy in the aftermath of the First World War. The movement from the dialectics of crisis (i.e. Pirandello's relativism) to the compensations offered by existence apart from the social group parallels the movement from the state of uncertainty and confusion of post-war society to the acceptance of a new, mystical form of civil life embodied in the "Fascist revolution" which, as it is known, presented itself as a substitute for the inadequacies of political reason. Pirandello's acceptance of Fascism should be viewed within the perspective of this historical crisis and the irrational solutions which the regime glorified.

Source: Robert S. Dombroski, "Laudisi's Laughter and the Social Dimension of *Right You Are (If You think So)*, " in *Modem Drama,* Vol. 16, 1973, pp. 337 46.

Critical Essay #4

The following essay contains Orazio Costa's comments regarding the attitudes seen in the play: "In fact, one is suggested here, which I attempted to realize scenically: analogous to the prying attitude of the provincial society gathered in a typical drawing-room, and facing a group of shy and secret creatures who refuse the principle of "sociability."

[Introduction]

Ever since 1945, many of Orazio Costa's productions have stood out as landmarks in the development of the Italian theatre.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that he has staged a good many of Pirandello's plays and even staged some of them several times over. A fascinating experience for such a recognized "perfectionist"!

One of Orazio Costa's most characteristic features is the combination of extreme rigour in the analysis of the text the sure sign of the philologist with a constant, but never completely fulfilled aspiration towards the highest summits of spirituality. And while equally fitted to make his mark at a University or to devote himself to meditation, he decided to consecrate his talents to the theatre, that is to say to the task of conveying literature to the stage and of embodying his aspirations in the most concrete of plastic forms.

This is what gives outstanding value to the study he has kindly sent us. On receiving the latter, we realized at once that lack of space would unfortunately prevent us from bringing it out in full.

We have therefore decided to publish only the first part and to omit, to our deep regret, Orazio Costa's commentaries on other Pirandello plays and notably on *The Giants of the Mountain*, the spirit of which he brought out to such excellent effect. [Costa directed Pirandello's plays several times, and was recognized for his intellectual rigor in interpreting dramatic texts.]

[Costa's Remarks]

Even before I realized my first staging, I was convinced, from the study of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and of *Right You Are If You Think You Are,* that Pirandello had taken the European theatre to the end of its bourgeois cycle by renovating it totally: plot, characters, settings. Pirandello, fully aware of the futility of the plot, reduced the argument to an interchangeable canvas; he rediscovered, in the characters' sufferings, the only dignity worthy of containing and expressing life; he stripped the stage of its decorative tinsel and restored it to the nudity of its primary function, that of a machine. Thus, he came to the theatre in a state of absolute virginity,

perfectly conscious of his part as a renovator and even perhaps all considered the only poet of his time in such a position. . ..

I am coming now to the interpretation of *Right You Are If You Think You Are,* a play I have also been able to stage twice, first with the Piccolo Teatro della Citta di Roma, in 1952, then with the Theatre National de Belgique, in 1959___The provincial town tallies with the theatre company and its presumption of having all its "recognized titles"; and the three unfortunates Mme Frola and the Ponza couple are effectively "characters" kneaded out of the same dough as the Son's character: they tend to be demure, to refuse to make an exhibition of themselves.

It must be admitted that, up to Pirandello, dramatic poetry tended, by its own nature, to confirm the existence of characters eager to manifest themselves, with the result of making creditable a vision of the world easy to read, transparent and, in its exuberance, wide open.

In *Right You Are* clearly appears the modern trend which consists in proposing for the audience, in each drama, a particular attitude. In fact, one is suggested here, which I attempted to realize scenically: analogous to the prying attitude of the provincial society gathered in a typical drawing-room, and facing a group of shy and secret creatures who refuse the principle of "sociability." A cruelly comic choir, crowded around a very small space the only space subsequently provided for the characters, seemingly questioned with much respect, in fact, pilloried.

In view of obtaining the greatest possible opposition between the cruel circle and the "mourning" central group, during all the rehearsals I kept apart the actors of the grotesque choir and the tragic characters, so that their tones aggressive questioning on the one hand, tragic panicking on the other would not, from the beginning, tend towards an insufferable unification, but that, fixed on distinct registers, they would only in the end reach that minimum of common tuning demanded by the necessity of establishing a colloquy, however hostile....

Source: Orazio Costa, *"Six Characters; Right You Are ...* and *Henry IV*,[with introduction]" in *World Theatre*, Vol. 16, 1967, pp. 248-55.

Topics for Further Study

Which is more important in *Right You Are, If You Think You Are* the theme of relativism, or the moral to respect the privacy of others? Support your claim with evidence from the play.

How does Laudisi's role as *raisonneur* affect the audience's appreciation of the quandary faced by his relatives and friends concerning Ponza and Signora Frola?

Of what significance is the final speech by Signora Ponza?

Compare and Contrast

1917: A network of "ententes" or political alliances between European countries had been signed wherein each promised to help its allies in case of war. Europe was divided by paper loyalties. As warring countries coerced their neutral allies to join in the war according to their agreements, there was a "domino" effect as the new aggressors called upon their neutral allies.

Today: Europe is attempting to create a universal agreement among its nations on several levels: economically through the "eurodollar," and politically through the European Union (Europa), a multinational European parliament.

1917: Europe was embroiled in a full-scale war that left no country, even those like Belgium that claimed neutrality, safe from invasion.

Today: Although the Kosovo crisis of 1998 threatened stability in Eastern Europe, decisive action on the part of NATO prevented the conflict from spreading to other countries.

1917: Influenza killed more people during and just after World War I than did weapons and bombs, and tuberculosis was an incurable and devastating disease that often led to death.

Today: A simple annual flu shot can prevent most strains of influenza, and the millions who do not receive inoculations can get relief from its symptoms with antibiotics. Flu can still be fatal, if not treated adequately. Tuberculosis, though still incurable, is rare in developed countries. Skin tests are used to screen for its presence so that the disease can be managed if contracted.

What Do I Read Next?

Pirandello's most famous play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922), provides another perspective on his theories of self and consciousness. George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1905) is another "drama of ideas," in which the characters debate Shaw's ideas about social philosophy. The modernist poem "Portrait d'une Femme" (1912) by Ezra Pound comes close to representing consciousness in the way that Pirandello presents it, as a source of many interpretations. Pound was an American expatriate living in Italy from 1924 until 1944, when he was arrested for treason (for making Fascist remarks) by the United States. Other modernists concerned with consciousness are James Joyce (especially in his novel, Ulysses, 1922, where he experiments with "stream of consciousness" writing) and Marcel Proust (in his seven-part novel about memory, *A La Recherche de Temps Perdue*, translated as *Remembrance of Things Past,* 1913-1927). "The Falling Girl" by Italian Dino Buzzati is an example of a postmodern parable. Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote many poem and short story parables on themes of self and reality, such as "The Circular Ruins" and "The Aleph." Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez's parable, "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" also concerns differing interpretations of reality.

Further Study

Bassanese, Fiona. *Understanding Luigi Pirandello (Understanding Modern European and Latin American Literature),* University of South Carolina Press, 1997.

Considers Pirandello in the light of the modernist crises of consciousness and of the self.

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Product Design
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Manufacturing
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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board memberseducational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamedfor instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as The Narrator and alphabetized as Narrator. If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name Jean Louise Finch would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname Scout Finch.
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535