1917 – Right you are! (If you think so) – Drama in three acts

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In Italiano – Così è (se vi pare)
En Español – Así es… si así te parece

Introduction, Analysis, Summary
Characters, Act I
Act II
Act III

Introduction – Characters analysis
Plot Summary – Themes and style
Critical overwiev – Criticism

Così è (se vi pare) **Giuliana Lojodice – Pino Micol. Regia di Michele Placido, 2012. Immagine dal Web.**

Introduction

As with many of Pirandello's plays, *Right you are, If you think so* is an adaptation of one of his short stories, "*Signora Frola and Signor 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.*"

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No sex, no death, but there's plenty of passion in this play about identity and relative truths. Pirandello wrote *Right you are (If you think so)* in 1917, before his more famous *Six Characters in search of an author* (1921). In *Right you are*, seven characters—he liked to deploy more than the customary two or three on stage at a time—seven respectable, middle-class types in a comfortable, bourgeois parlor argue over their perceptions of a mysterious woman seen at the window of a nearby building. That's all that happens. Yet the play offered a blueprint to many works thereafter, including the brilliant Japanese film, *Rashomon*.

The performance, a rare treat for New York audiences, never felt dated. Rather, Pirandello is not performed often enough, although every critic of note acknowledges that his plays revolutionized theater. Argument, or debate, is of course the oldest form of drama. What made *Right you are* timely was its intellectual "*conceit*," or central idea, that all is relative; individual perceptions can never reach unanimity.

G.B. Shaw in England and Luigi Pirandello in Italy perfected the strategy of dramatizing ideas that were floating free in the intellectual climate: in this they were more than standard

bearers of modernism and modernity. Absolutes at the core of science and philosophy had been crumbling well before *Right you are*. By the turn of the century, subjectivity had replaced objectivity as the stance from which to see and evaluate the world and human behavior as well.

Einstein, after seeing a performance of *Six Characters in search of an author*, greeted Pirandello backstage saying, "*We are soul-mates.*" The anecdote may be apocryphal, but the point about relativity remains an apt comment on the theme in *Six Characters* and *Right you are* as well. It was one of Pirandello's favorite subjects.

New York, December 5, 2003

Characters analysis

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!*"

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 Signor 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 Signora 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 sanitorium. 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 Signor 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.

Themes and style

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 so,* 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 so* 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 so* 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 so* 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 so,* 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 so* 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.*

Critical overwiev

Right you are, If you think so 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 so* 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 so*

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 "i*ngeniously 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

Carole Hamilton

Hamilton is an English teacher at Cary Academy, an innovative private school in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay she examines the themes of privacy and relative truth in Right you are, If you think so, *especially in light of Pirandello's tormented personal life.*

Pirandello's *Right you are, If you think so* 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 so.* The play concerns "*flux*" of shifting truths in the several explanations that Ponza and Signora Frola proclaim about Signora 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 so,* 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.

A. Petrusso

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 Signor 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 Signor 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 Signor 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.

Signor Ponza does not want Frola to have a normal social life with anyone, including her neighbors. Yet Frola and Signor 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.

1917 – Right you are! (If you think so)
Drama in three acts
Introduction, Analysis, Summary
Characters, Act I
Act II
Act III

In Italiano – Così è (se vi pare)
En Español – Así es… si así te parece

««« Pirandello in English

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