Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936)

Born in the Sicilian town of Agrigento and educated in Palermo, Rome and Bonn (Germany), the Nobel Prize winner (1934) Luigi Pirandello is a key literary figure of the twentieth century, whose concerns reflect the modernist crisis of consciousness. In his novels, plays, and short stories, the unity of the Cartesian subject is irretrievably shattered into a myriad of masks that carry the Baroque interplay of being and appearances to an extreme. In the shift from a stable and unitary interpretation of human identity to a plural and changing one, Pirandello’s works express a skeptical view of human existence while paving the way to postmodernism. Like identity, truth itself ceases to be a unified concept: acquiring a plurality of meanings, it becomes the expression of individual interpretations.

From his initial novel *L’esclusa* [*The Outcast*] (1901), in which the theme of honor and rejection is resolved in a paradoxical way, Pirandello’s works question the phenomenal world and the concept of “truth,” and expose the absurdity of a human condition trapped in the arbitrariness of social conventions. Problematizing the relationship between individual and society, Pirandellian characters struggle in vain to find a way out of their constricting existence and to overcome the limitations of their conditions. If chance can offer an ordinary man such as Mattia Pascal, protagonist of the novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Mattia Pascal*) (1904), the opportunity to construct a new life under an assumed identity, his illusory freedom is short-lived. Finding it impossible to reinstate his previous identity, he becomes an outcast who finds refuge in art and in the writing of his life story. The art-vs.-life dichotomy, so crucial in Modernism, finds resolution in Mattia Pascal’s act of self-narration. The contested issue of identity, which recurs in Pirandello’s fiction, appears too in his last novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (*One, no one and A Hundred Thousand*), in which the attempt at self-consciousness is inevitably doomed to fail.

The multiplicity and disjunction of the self, the many-sided and contrastive nature of reality, and the illusoriness of the claim to unity are translated into innovative dramatic forms in his plays. In many cases adaptations of his short stories, his theatrical pieces continue his exploration of the interplay of identity, reputation, and truth against the background of oppressive bourgeois social norms. In one of his most famous plays, *Così è (se vi pare)* (*It is so (if you think so)* (1917), the weight of social conventions and the stigma of adverse judgements are resolved in an open-ended epilogue in which the protagonist agrees to be what people thought she was. Pirandellian characters typically struggle against the imprisonment of other people’s judgement of them.

Turning to metatheatrical devices of Baroque origin, *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*) (1921) stages the complex relationship between author, characters, and artistic creation. Foregrounding the arbitrariness of linguistic exchanges, it explores the very act of dramatic creation and representation, and the drama of incomprehension. For its self-reflexive and experimental nature, it is considered one of the most important plays of the twentieth century. The first of a trilogy that includes *Ciascuno a suo modo* (*Each in His Own Way*) (1924) and *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (*Tonight We Improvise*) (1929), *Six Characters* breaks with bourgeois plots and melodramatic conventions to strip theatrical devices of their own masks.

As a theatre director and producer, Pirandello staged his own plays and continued his experimentation with dramatic media, exploring many of the themes present in his novels. Among them, the interplay between illusion and reality, acting and living, madness and sanity finds expression in *Enrico IV* (*Henry IV*) (1922).

Having shattered the naturalistic certitudes of the previous century, Pirandello left a vast literary corpus that addresses the crisis of existence, the relationship between illusion and reality, and the limits of reason and language, thus paving the way for new experimental forms of theatrical expression and for postmodern modes of signification.

**References and Further Reading**

**Novels**

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**Marina Bettaglio, University of Victoria**

**Recommended Illustrations (4)**

<http://www.google.com/doodles/luigi-pirandellos-145th-birthday>

<http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Luigi_Pirandello_1934_-_office.jpg>

[http://www.edu.alinari.it/search.aspx](http://www.edu.alinari.it/search.aspx" \t "_blank) (Alinari collection, picture ID IIB-S-093750-1547)  
picture caption: Pirandello receiving the Nobel Prize

[http://cultura.biografieonline.it/enrico-iv-trama/](http://cultura.biografieonline.it/enrico-iv-trama/" \t "_blank)

picture caption: Pirandello with actors in a performance of  
*Henry IV* (*Enrico IV*)