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Authorship and Authority of the Emotive Being in a Technological Age

Luigi Pirandello, a Nobel Prize winning Italian dramatist and novelist, premiered one of his most famous works, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, at the Teatro Valle in 1921. Pirandello crafts a commentary on theater as an artform in this work, calling into question the actor's authority to portray characters whose personal reality they will never truly grasp. He begs an answer to how can an actor, a man, fully portray a character's written and fixed reality, when that man's 'reality' is constantly changing and presents itself more as an illusion. Pirandello argues that the text of the character from the writer's hand and mind is the only fountain of truth to their reality, and any attempts from artists to portray them is rooted in falsehood. This concept has been magnified to heights that Pirandello could have never imagined with the rise of technology in the entertainment industry. Digitized movies/television, social media, and streaming services have further blurred the lines between a character's reality and the performance of it. Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) tackles ideas of authority of the emotive being between original characters and the actors attempting to represent their reality that they will never fully know. This perspective of the performative self has expanded in our technological society with contemporary productions at theaters such as A Noise Within including film elements, illuminating the increasing disconnect between reality of experience and developing styles of storytelling that further perpetuates the division between

illusion and reality that Pirandello commented on. With narratives such as reality television and YouTube/influencer culture, the ramifications of this multiplying industry challenges audiences to attempt to distinguish what is reality or illusion, who is the character or the performer, and who is truly authoring their 'story'.

Luigi Pirandello, alongside Ibsen and Strindberg, revolutionized modern drama in Europe by deconstructing conventions of theatrical subjects and structure. Born in Sicily on June 28, 1867 to a prosperous family of mine owners, Pirandello began his literary education at a young age, continuing until he earned his doctorate in 1891 ("Luigi Pirandello", 1). Pirandello married a woman named Antonietta, the daughter of a family friend in 1894, who eventually developed a paranoid mental condition set off by the flooding of Pirandello's family mine in which all of their money was invested ("Luigi Pirandello", 1). She was admitted to a mental asylum in 1919 and her condition affected Pirandello's writings throughout his career. His relationship to her and her mental condition shifted his focus to the essence, appearance, and reality of the human psyche. His work was scarcely noticed by Italian critics up until he published *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in 1921, which became a controversial success and shot him to international fame with the support of the fascist Italian leader Benito Mussolini. *Six Characters* tackled themes of the challenges of communication as the ideal reality of the characters was juxtaposed with the unceremonious reality of the actors set to portray them, ideas that Pirandello pondered throughout his career. This is shown in many of The Fathers philosophical wanderings of how humans relate to each other through art and stories, "How can we understand each other if the words I use have the sense and the value that I expect them to have, but whoever is listening to me inevitably thinks that those same words have a different sense and value, because of the

private world he has inside himself too. We think we understand each other: but we never do"
(Pirandello 59). Pirandello continued to grapple with these divisions of illusion and reality within
the human condition in later plays such as *Diana e la Tuda* (1927) and *Trovarsi* (1932), and his
body of work eventually earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1934 ("Luigi Pirandello",
2). Pirandello died shortly after in 1936, and though his plays are rarely produced today, their
themes of the clash between art and life, between form and reality are highly applicable to the
technologically advanced entertainment industry of today. With the advances in online streaming
and the rise of reality TV/influencer culture, the distinguishing features between reality and
illusion are blurred, as it is increasingly difficult to tell who has the authority of emotive beings
and who, if anyone, is the rightful author.

Pirandello was writing in a time of socio-political turmoil in Europe, similar in certain
ways to the conflicts we are continually seeing today. Pirandello wrote his major works,
including *Six Characters*, in the early 20th century when Europe was wrought with destruction
as World War I shook the globe and fascist movements began to gain traction in Italy. It was
during this time that Mussolini rose to power with a blend of French syndicalism, nationalism,
and Italian futurism that molded itself into Fascism, which argued for violence as a source of
positive change (Merriman 3). Fascism aimed to permeate all aspects of society from the home
to public shared space through militarization and fascist education in schools. This control bled
into artistic movements, as much of the cultural products of the time were censored by the
government. Pirandello wrote in a time were the Italian government encouraged nostalgic and
avant-garde literary movements as long as they were not anti-fascist, and he eventually joined
the Fascist party and gained support from Mussolini (Merriman 3). Pirandello's relationship with

the Fascist party was tumultuous; he oftentimes gained support from Mussolini to tour his

productions, and other times he tore up his membership card in an act of rebellion ("Luigi

Pirandello" 2). The rocky socio-political context that framed much of Pirandello's career is

reflected in his work that examines the clash between art and life, and what can be considered an

objective reality. The same themes are being reflected in politics today, as politicians such as

Donald Trump are fueling a polarized society. This 'us versus them' mentality is eerily similar to

Pirandello's post World War I society that was wrought with shifting governments and divided

politics. Pirandello's disillusioned spirit found in his writing was popular in the post-war culture

of the time, but his meta-theatrical and sometimes absurdist structure of his work broke down

conventions and brought into question who in the artistic process of theater has the authority

over the emotive being, and how that translates to audiences.

 Six Characters in Search of an Author premiered in May of 1921 in Teatro Valle, a

famous playhouse in Rome, the likes of which avant-garde theater rarely sees. Pirandello's play

was not being tested in a small, experimental theater house among an audience of seasoned

theater goers, rather it was put up in one of the largest theaters for the public to see and

experience. What ensued on opening night was described as a "battle, the most violent and noisy

ever experienced in the Teatro Valle… there were defenders and detractors of the play, scuffles in

the theatre and a hasty exit by Pirandello by the stage door" (Lorch 31). The audience that

evening was rocked by Pirandello's deconstructions and ideas, but overall the play received

positive reviews from the critics on its opening night. There is evidence of what happened

outside the theater, as divided audience members argued about the relevance and meaning of the

play. However, there are little to no photographs, programs, rehearsal reports, or director's notes

to capture how the text visually manifested itself onstage for the first time, therefore the only evidence of what crossed the stage that night is found in the original text itself. The avant garde and meta theatrical style of the play challenged audiences to face "the impossibility of the actor to present the character", an idea that was not often confronted on stage during this time in Italy (Lorch 22). Pirandello additionally questioned the construct of time as it relates to characters versus people, since with characters, "all moments of their lives conceived in the author's mind are potentially present, ready to be called upon and rendered actual. Their lives belong to a continuous present" (Lorch 25). Calling time and it's reality into question was a tough pill to swallow for Pirandello's first audience, and including the Freudian layer between the Father and the Step Daughter gave audiences a lot to talk about. The buzz created around the show gave *Six Characters* a tour around Europe, and became Pirandello's most iconic work. The philosophical ideas Pirandello posed are still pondered today in different contexts with the development of recording and entertainment technology. If people have the ability to record and create their own entertainment content, are they therefore able to call upon moments of their lives as characters can in a way? The easy access to producing content on programs such as Youtube and social media platforms are blurring the line between person and character, and between reality and what is illusion on screen. With advances in technology, contemporary productions such as the recent revival at A Noise Within have expanded on Pirandello's original challenges to the authority of the emotive being and deconstructions of theatre as a medium to include film/television and the culture surrounding entertainment today.

In the spring of 2016, A Noise Within in Pasadena, California mounted a revival of Pirandello's seminal work *Six Characters In Search of an Author*. It was a fascinating addition to

their season, as *Six Characters* rarely is seen outside of academia anymore, even though

Pirandello was one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. The directors, Geoff and

Julia Elliott, focused on Pirandello's ponderings on how we can trust an idea of reality when life

insists on changing from minute to minute. From their notes on the show, it was clear that the

goal of the production was to revisit Pirandello's text that, "wonders how, from a variety of

competing viewpoints, an observer can discern the truth. And it struggles to separate the life in

art from what's merely make-believe" and bring it to life almost 100 years later, where this

sentiment still rings true (Miller 1). Our society has taken strides in advancing technology since

the time when Pirandello wrote *Six Characters*, and many of the dualities between reality and

illusion that Pirandello originally comments on can still apply today in different ways. This

production plays with the idea that the addition of film and social media to our society has

magnified the themes of *Six Characters* in terms of how reality, illusion, authorship, and the

authority of emotive beings is increasingly indiscernible. The production did this primarily

through design elements that added to the foundation of meta theatricality in the text, which was

altered to fit into the context of A Noise Within (names of actors, productions that were

happening, crew members, etc.). The Characters enter in head to toe 1920's black garb as if

plucked right from the street of Pirandello's Italy, and their characterization hovers between real

and unreal, leaving the audience to discern what is truthful and what is melodramatic falsehood

(Miller 1). The bare 'rehearsal-esque' scenic design added to the meta theatricality, and curated a

feeling as though the audience was merely observing a rehearsal.

Once act two begins and the Characters begin to stage the bits and pieces of their stories,

the Actors pull out cameras and begin to film the Characters as they are performing their reality.

The footage of the Characters is being projected in front of the audience, so they have the experience of watching it live and from a screen at the same time. This technological addition to the production flings the audience from the classical text into the 21st century, where recording devices are at our fingertips and anyone can share anything that they record to be put on the Internet for entertainment. This brings into question Pirandello's idea of who has the authority over the emotive being: the author, the characters, or the actors, and what happens to this authority when stories can be shared, spread, and altered so easily through technology. Pirandello would argue that the author has the authority as he is the one who penned the characters and the entirety of their lives on the page. This is shown in act three as the Father explains to the Actors that they have the choice to snap out of their roles, but for the characters the story is their whole life, "What for you is an illusion, to be created, is for us our unique reality" (Pirandello 55). He did not believe that actors could ever truly capture a character's reality, and that it inherently would be a falsified illusion ("Luigi Pirandello" 2). Pirandello's argument is then challenged when the medium of film is added to the portrayal of the story. Film is a recorded experience that can be repeated without change, while theater changes constantly since it is a live performative experience. A Noise Within's addition of the film element to their production revitalizes Pirandello's commentary on life versus art and illusion versus reality, illuminating a fresh relevance today.

Both the original staging of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in 1921 and A Noise Within's recent production tells the story of six lost characters searching for their creator while reliving their stagnant reality for the members of the theater that they appear in, which calls into question what the boundaries are between life and art. The themes of each production are

inherently the same, but the implications of those themes in the culture of our world today is vastly different than when Pirandello originally premiered this work. In 1920's Italy, the Fascist dictatorship was rising to power, and many artists and philosophers had feelings of disillusionment and despair which pushed them to call the foundations of the human condition into question. This is seen in Act 2 of *Six Characters* when the Father teases the Manager about the nature of their realities, "A character, sir, may always ask a man who he is. Because a character has really a life of his own, marked with his especial characteristics; for which reason he is always "somebody." But a man—I'm not speaking of you now—may very well be "nobody."" (Pirandello 59). Pirandello touches on life's constant change, and how that makes our reality more of an illusion than a characters' who has his or her whole life and actions set in stone and imagined for them by an author. The duality between somebody and nobody, actor and character, and life and art reflect the disjointed anxiety felt at the time this play was published while the world was wrought with negative change. In the 21st century, similar polarities are seen in society and politics as our culture makes drastic shifts now that technology is on the rise. With new mediums of entertainment such as Youtube and a variety of streaming sites, it is harder to discern the truth- there are so many content creators that it is easy to manipulate the truth or spread false information. There have already been foreseen problems with the rise of technology, especially in the realm of entertainment where streaming allows high volumes of content to be available at any time or place, and the influence of social media makes it possible for anyone to create and share content. This is seen through the concept of "fake news" from different platforms that are twisting news stories, making it difficult for the public to distinguish between reality and illusion, between truth and fictionalized stories. These issues found their way into the

production of *Six Characters* at A Noise Within with the addition of video recording, drawing

attention to the problems of authorship and authority of the emotive being. The Actors filmed the

content and have it in their possession to share and manipulate, which takes away authority from

the Characters and gives it to the Actors, which Pirandello adamantly argued against.

Pirandello's original production centered on the pitfalls of theater as an artform, as it can only

present the illusion of a character's story, not it's true reality as an author can in novels per say.

The medium of film and television brings up the same issue that Pirandello pointed at but at a

higher scale because the actors and the story is divided by a screen, and audiences are presented

the illusion of a recorded experience. A Noise Within's production expanded on the original

staging at Teatro Valle by adding video recording elements and commenting on the alienation of

the character's reality in the medium of film from its audience, making it more difficult to

discern what is reality and what is illusion.

Luigi Pirandello's commentary on the authority of the emotive being and his criticism of

theater as an art form in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* directly applies to today's

advances in entertainment in the form of film, reality television, and social media. In a culture

where sharing pieces of your life is so normalized, the line between a person and a character put

on for the public eye is blurred. People increasingly have desired more personal authority from

the ease and accessibility that comes from technology, with millions of entertainment options at

our fingertips. This has diminished, in a way, the authority of the emotive being and true

authorship of storytelling as our technological society becomes increasingly bent on seeing art as

a diversion or just for meer entertainment with artistic mediums such as film and television. With

the increasing popularity of social media platforms and Youtube, it has become easier for anyone

to take artistic authority in sharing their own personal reality. Pirandello had the seed of this idea in *Six Characters* as the play identifies, "the shift in theatrical perspective from a communally shared sense of an omniscient viewer to an increasingly diverse audience of individuals, with the desire for personal authority… He acknowledges the individual's struggle for subjectivity, which is fueled by the desire to generate one's own life script from their own emotional and experiential material" (Lovrod 3). Pirandello's analysis of human interaction with art and storytelling has magnified beyond his years into the mass popularization of social media, Youtube, and reality TV celebrities. With the access to create and share your own content, anyone can turn their personal lives into entertainment or become influencers that can curate their own brand based around their lives. As this becomes more normalized, the line between an online illusion and reality becomes indiscernible. Words, stories, and lives can be manipulated and shared by anyone through technologically advanced entertainment mediums. The more reliant our society becomes on these forms of entertainment, the more Pirandello's ideas of who has authorship and authority of the emotive being comes into question. Luigi Pirandello's themes of distinguishing between life and art and how characters can hold authority over their stories addressed in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* has gained increasing relevance today as society becomes more reliant on technology that makes it easier to have personal authority over the content being shared and consumed.

Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* revolutionized avant garde and metatheatricality on stage in the early 20th century, laying the groundwork for questions of authorship and authority of the emotive being that maintain relevance today. In recent decades there has been an increasing grey area of who has authority over storytelling as entertainment

becomes more accessible through social media platforms and reality based programming,

making it easy for anyone to have personal authority to record and share their lives. These

advances has made it difficult to distinguish between reality and illusion, truth and fiction, and

person and character, manifesting Pirandello's ideas in *Six Characters* in ways that he would

have never been able to imagine when the play was conceived. Although *Six Characters in*

Search of an Author has rarely seen the stage in recent years, contemporary productions such as

the 2016 remount at A Noise Within that include film mediums and recording technology are

vital in showing Pirandello's relevance today. In a society where it is increasingly difficult to

discern between reality and illusion in the consuming world of technology, Pirandello's questions

of authorship and emotive authority are as important now as they were in the early 20th century.

Luigi Pirandello and his characters are still wandering in the search of expression, which is

becoming more difficult to find in a consuming age of technology.

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