

The Multiple Reality Dimensions In Pirandello's Six Characters In Search Of An Author

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Abstract

Pirandello draws a barrier between actors and characters. The Characters in the play has a distinct reality in their own created world. The Actors are real but play fictional characters and imitate different personalities on stage. The Characters live their world wearing masks of permanent emotions; they are unchangeable and are therefore 'ideal' performers. There is the reality of the audience and the fiction of the Characters. They search for an author who will make this fiction real. The inner play and the outer play are unrelated. The former is the illusion but draws on the social reality of incest and family violence. The realities unite in the display of horror and sympathy.

Keywords: Reality, Fiction, Actor, Character, Author.

The complete significance of Eliot's saying that Luigi Pirandello 'has had the courage and imagination which have made it possible to penetrate realism and arrive at reality' lies in the artistry with which the playwright handled the concrete theme in *Six Characters In Search Of An Author*. The focus of this theme is not just setting the stage for a dramatic exchange of thoughts between individuals of a natural and built up groups but also in keeping an emphasis on a reality at every definite moment of the play. This reality scattered throughout the play is broken down into sections, each nurtured at separate levels so deeper than the main frame of an outer play of actors and characters that even the fictional becomes the real and what is known to be real is questioned. The consistent maintenance of this reality, directly and indirectly, coalesce it into a whole with an absolute originality. The prominence of this reality, or realities, is a dramatic force that brings about the appropriate audience response as to their emotions and pent up feelings for it is they who see it in its true colour of everyday life.

The Six Characters are created realities, thrust into life. They are in no script because they are the script. Their happening upon the stage claiming to be in search of an author ironically highlights the fact that they are in fact complete formed characters. So that means they had an author – their 'author', one who charted their world map, set in motion the ebb and flow of their life's tide in a chosen set of circumstances before abandoning them. And here in the play we have the characters oscillating about in the world. What could be realized is that the characters know about this existential anguish, their identity only meaningful in that world set by 'the author', a world which however fictional is real to them, the only reality for them and they are bent upon displaying before the 'real' world, that of the Actors, the Producer and the outer audience, this fictional real world of theirs, so that their existence and identity have a greater meaning after it is staged in the memory of the audience before whom they perform.

The reality of the play is the central puzzle factor. Less alike the predominant notion of reality on stage, dramatizing the time period, this play has various levels of reality. Besides the much familiar convention of a play within a play, there is a reality within a reality – the reality of the audience who live in this world and the fictional reality of the Characters who live in the world of their original ‘author’. The Producer becomes their second author in such that he would be the link between them and their recognition to the outside world, the audience ‘we’. And the Actors are the go-between who has their own character in respect of which they are the part of the audience and the part in which they imitate the role played by the Characters and enact their tragic story of incest and adultery – the social reality in the play.

The unconventionality and originality of *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* is it’s about being a play in the making with the Characters as actors and the Actors as the audience on stage and the spectators beyond as the other form of the audience. The very convention of watching the actors and the audience as dominating two different worlds with the barricade of an invisible fourth wall is just not broken but seemingly collide the two worlds in an almost metaphysical union yet stand separate for there is none of that interaction one might experience in an intimate theatre. The Leading Actresses’ late entrance from the auditorium saying that she couldn’t find a taxi is where the world of the audience and the world of theatre meet in its realistic connotation – the equal connection with the humdrum outside world.

The very ‘play’ which the Characters present decent and true to their traits and characteristics with which they were created become a play more close to reality because it is the Characters’ own story of adultery and family violence though they are in fact fictional reality. On the contrary, the Actors who are much like the regular ordinary theatre actors rehearse plays which are fictional based on imaginary characters. There is thus the case of infidelity to their own characteristics and their performance becomes a fictional reality though ironically they themselves are real. The Characters are real life actors in the fictional world of their traits created by the ‘author’ while the Actors are fictional characters impersonating different personalities on stage thought they belong to a real world. The Producer could only help impose the illusion of the play *The Rules Of The Game* that was their subject of rehearsal. He could at the most try to give it the appearance of reality, something closer to the truth, but the Characters are true themselves and the theatre is their only means of communicating that truth. But then again, the Producer is true to his profession of giving ‘life on the stage to imaginary people’ and the Characters are true to their life story.

Father: You’ve given life! You’ve created living beings with more genuine life than people have who breathe and wear clothes! (Pirandello 12)

The exchange of philosophical dialogues between the Father and the Producer, this whole multiplicity of interactions between the real and illusory becomes the play for the real audience.

When the Characters enter they are in masks. These masks sum up their fundamental emotions with which they were created, which they had to carry in an everlasting burden as much as the world in which they live, a shallow broken world of shocking adultery and family misunderstandings they were cursed with, that alighted those masks of emotions. For the Father it is ‘Remorse’, for the Stepdaughter it is ‘Revenge’, for the Son ‘Scorn’ and for the Mother ‘Sorrow’. Fixed in their masks of emotion and constant positions, they cannot leave each other how much they love or hate one another. The Little Boy never looks up because of the Son’s presence, the Son can never leave the other Characters how much he

hates them and the Mother, ever wanting to hold him back to her, cannot move from where she is. The masks cover up their central ideology through which they reverberate while narrating to the Producer the different versions of their story steeped deep down their hearts. The intention was to enact their play so as to open up this world before the Producer, the Actors and the wider audience. The conversations leading to the slow unfolding of the hidden scenes much like a hidden dark secret heighten the Father and the Stepdaughter's plight unveiling the social reality of the bestiality of man.

Father: ...unspeakable misery for the man who lives alone and who detests sordid, casual affairs; not old enough to do without women, but not young enough to be able to go and look for one without shame! (26)

Two sharp divisions between the story of the Characters and the drama are the specimens of two distinct realities – the personal, which consists of the graphical reality of sex and violence and the reality of what they are on stage. The Characters converge into separate identities when they are a part of the respective realities. While the Stepdaughter, the Son and the other children hold onto the one persona that individualizes them in both the realities, the Father is a man of wild sexual desires under his moral notions in the private world while being a lamenting Father acknowledging his misdeeds. The Mother who is a wife in her private story is a sorrowful mother of four children before the audience. It is in these corresponding selves that they need to be looked upon for those are the only things realized.

The varying of the private worlds varies the versions of the story. What could be made out is that after the Father married the Mother, he sent her away with his secretary with whom she was in love and he felt she would be much better off with him. With the Father she had the Son but later gave birth to three more children. The relations between them were estranged and the troubles grew with the Father watching and following whom he knew to be the Stepdaughter coming out of school. This reached a height of suffrage when they unwittingly engaged in a sexual liaison at the back of Madame Pace's shop realizing the situation only too late. The resulting predicament brought about misunderstandings and as such the Characters have been suffering since then, each in their own way in the awareness of a drastic fact that had permanently left a mark on them. The extreme complexities of the family made it hard for the Son to become a part of the company of other Characters whom he only sees with scorn. He is the legitimate son but claims to be a character not fully developed.

The social reality got encompassed in the narrative of the Father and the Stepdaughter and gave way to considerable audience reaction of interest, horror and sympathy for the Characters, which drew them closer to them as well as maintained the line of alienation that had been marked both in their physical appearance as well as their separate realities. The directions had it that "effort must be made to create the effect that the Six Characters are very different from the Actors of the company" (9). It is to be noted that the playwright had created a separate audience for the play alongside the Characters. This could be to highlight how the audience 'we' look upon an audience and their impressions in the Producer and the Actors, which is ironically a mirror-glance at ourselves. This is in keeping with the experimentation Pirandello aggravates in the play till the very end.

As the audience watches, the Father and the Stepdaughter under their frequent conflicts unfolds the story, each from their own perspectives, before that could actually be acted upon. The absence of proper links between the Father, the Mother and the Son dispersed any means of a family bonding and to lift the burden of emptiness in favor of a new happiness only ended up in a greater pain.

While the other characters retain their distance, the Father and the Stepdaughter, though not in complete betrayal of their emotions, actually come out of their character to tell their story, their passions. This is where the original 'author' fails. The created reality assumes a self importance and independence that makes them break from their omnipresent world and the omnipotent author to come out and interact with the actual reality comprising of actors and an audience. This is the other world they were trying to have a glimpse of, maybe with a desire to live in it and throw away their masks of fiction. This is a grave attempt at decolonizing their ideology stamped upon by the 'author' and to untie the knot that kept them staggering in their world of hardship on and on. They seek to know what it is like to be truly free. The Father and the Stepdaughter, therefore, assume a dual personality, in which they are Characters pertaining to one particular emotion and situation, the reality fiction and the narrators trying to make the Producer understand in attitudes different from the ones their 'author' imagined for them, the reality.

Father: When a character is born he immediately assumes such an independence even of his own author that everyone can imagine him in scores of situations that his author hadn't even thought of putting him in, and he sometimes acquires a meaning that his author never dreamed of giving him. (65)

On a closer examination, it is perhaps this assumed independence which led to Madame Pace's entrance in the auditorium. Maybe the author never actually meant for Madame Pace to come alive but just to remain in the background of the story, turning the tables for the Father-Stepdaughter intimacy. Her character was meant only to be confined in the world of her dress shop but with the very 'articles of her trade' – the hats, coats and scarves – they actually brought the Character into existence, if it is only for a brief moment. The Actors and the Producer are visibly afraid of her appearance, more like an 'apparition', that was not meant to be real but imagined.

Father: Can't you see this is a miracle of reality, that is born, brought to life, lured here reproduced, just for the sake of this scene, with more right to be alive here than you have? (43)

The Stepdaughter's conversation with Madame Pace undertaken in the form of a whisper undermines all the realistic traits of conventional theatre. Their conversation is their truth – the truth of the situation they were in, with the Father waiting 'behind the door' and the very quiet way of speaking 'under their breaths' was to prevent the Father from hearing them. They are again real, alive in their characters and the given situation, but not to the Actors or the Producer. So when the Juvenile Lead demanded, "Louder! Speak up!" (44) the Stepdaughter retorted:

What we're talking about you can't talk about loudly. (44)

When they are Characters performing, it is as if they remain immersed in the halo of their world oblivious of the fact that they are rehearsing for an audience who become invisible. Their 'play' is a reality which they create again and again so that the story is reciprocated.

The play within a play consists of the actual 'Scene' that takes place between the Father and the Stepdaughter. They are eager to portray the absolute crude reality of the intimacy, to step beyond the Producer's censorship, not realizing that they were on a stage. The 'pale' feature of the Father shows that he is conscious of the reality of what was about to happen between them because it had already happened earlier, that is their life's history and now he has to repeat it, recreate it, in order to dramatize it before the Producer.

He is very pale but already involved in the reality of his recreated life. (47)

He knows the reality but still has to keep up his appearances as his character requires him to do it before the scene takes place. So he comes forward “with a new note in his voice” (47)

The scene at the shop is where the Characters go to the highest depth of their created selves to be followed sometime later by another at the garden. To perform their reality, they desire to set the stage in the best and appropriate fashion pertaining to the original description of the shop. The effect of the recreated scene has its toll on the Mother too who knows well what was about to happen and still watches it ‘intently’ with sadness, dismay, anxiety and horror, sometimes turning her face away, sobbing. This is the inner play sometimes interrupted from the outer play of the observing Actors, “Be careful! Those are our hats!” (48) Though it goes parallel with *Hamlet*, there is no connection whatsoever between the two forms of the plays. The whole of *Hamlet* is fictional and the inner play, ‘The Murder of Gonzago’ was of importance in the main plot of Hamlet’s madness and inner conflict with the truth behind the words of the Ghost and revelation of the crime of Claudius.

Observe my uncle. If his occulted guilt

Do not itself unkennel in one speech,

It is a damned ghost that we have seen,

And my imaginations are as foul

As Vulcan’s stithy. (Shakespeare 167-168)

In *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* Pirandello maintains that the Actors are always real standing in the codes of their profession seldom entering the fictional world. But the inner play is for them a complete illusion.

When the Leading Actress teases the Stepdaughter saying she will look better in mourning than her and the Producer says, “You might learn something!” (50) the playwright shows how the two worlds can collide but never conglomerate even though they are together. The fictional is complete art and the real can only come closer to but never completely, only indefinitely, attain that art. The Leading Actress does not understand that the Stepdaughter’s mourning is real no matter how she looks in her black dress, something the former can only closely imitate even if she looks a lot better in a black dress. In order to draw upon this side by side enactment of the reality and fictional performance of the scene, Pirandello emphasizes that the playing of it by the Actors “must seem from the very beginning to be something quite different from the earlier scene” (50). Like the Mother said, “I’m not acting my suffering!” (57) The Actors are only performing it while the Characters have lived it, suffered it and they could not help protesting when the rehearsal was taking place. This again brings back an earlier dialogue of the Father when he said to the Producer that the portrayal of his character by the Leading Actor will only be an imitation of himself and not how he knows himself to be. No wonder he could not restrain himself or the Stepdaughter from laughing at the Actors copying their gestures.

Father: That’s just the point – they’re Actors. And they are acting our parts very well...But that’s what’s different. However much they want to be the same as us, they’re not. (53)

When actors and characters form two separate entities, the characters can be the true actors of their own nature but the actors can never be any ‘ideal’ characters, they can only be fictional characters. They can only assume and impersonate characters but can never be them in all totality. This is the epitome of the duality between the real, which is life and the fictional which is art. And in *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* art is made to come alive and show their tragic splendor. The Characters are true authors of themselves. Perhaps

there was no other 'author'. Maybe they themselves created their story, their circumstances, their 'characters' and now they require an author to make such characters 'real'.

The dispute with the Producer began when the Father expressed his desire to let them enact their drama as per their own terms and not in the way the Producer was subjecting it to changes with editing and allotting the Actors those roles. The Stepdaughter, knowing the horror of what she had faced, that made her so vengeful wanted him to know the real drama in all its characteristic originality and refuses to let him make the scene of adultery a 'sentimental romance'. But the Producer, as was his task to organize a theatre production only wanted to see the best of the performance so that he could use as much of it as possible. Trapped in his own reality, he fails to see the world of the fictional reality of the Characters where they were trapped that they have an original meaning in their moments.

Father: The eternal moment... trapped for all eternity, chained and suspended in that one fleeting shameful moment of my life. (58)

The Actors exist for the audience but the Characters exist only for themselves and in their attempt to depict their world, they exist both for the Actors and the audience. The Producer justly says that their performance is a "perfect illusion of reality!" (61) though the Characters have only that one reality which is an illusion, the reality fiction for the audience.

Father: What for you is an illusion you create, for us is our only reality. (62)

This is exactly what he meant when he asked the Producer "in all seriousness, who are you?" (63) The Father's speech symbolizes how a character has a greater meaning than a common man who changes with time. For the common man the past becomes an illusion in the present that further becomes another illusion in the future: "whatever is a reality today, whatever you touch and believe in and that seems real for you today, is going to be – like the reality of yesterday – an illusion tomorrow." (64) But a character remains constant, real forever. A character is thus eternal. Therefore the question the Producer asks in all mockery is ironical.

Producer: So now you're saying that you as well as this play... are more real than I am? (64)

The play comes to a conclusion with the inner play itself. The drowning of the Little Girl and the suicide of the Little Boy happen as a climax. Though *Six Characters In Search Of An Author* does not follow any proper theatrical technique with a beginning and a denouement at the end, the events at the garden raises the intensity of the family violence to the extreme peak and the outcome follows. It is here and here only all the realities meet with the Characters, the Actors, the Producer and the audience beyond sharing equally the same anguish and shock exasperated by the 'raucous' laughter of the Stepdaughter. The reality the Characters dawn on the stage by their presence and their performance is the philosophy which the conversation between the Father and the Producer had been signifying almost throughout the play. The two theatrical identities of actors and characters may appear to unite but actually can never do so. This is the accurate fact Pirandello augments. He did not draw any concrete wall between the two, it has always been there. They journey in a parallel segment alongside, a segment which in reality can never intersect.

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