



The theatrical and theoretical Approaches in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello

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Abstract:

Six Characters in Search of an Author is popularly considered to be the masterpiece that brought critical acclaim to its author, Luigi Pirandello, consolidating his position as a major dramatic force in the theatrical world in the twentieth century. The play, widely regarded as a tragi-comedy, contains within itself a number of paradoxes which work on different levels: dramatic, social and philosophical. The multiple layers of the play reflect the pessimism and sense of a failed fragmented society which were the characteristics of modernism. Moreover, the title of the play suggests a quest for a narrative of closure which is very modernist approach. This paper focuses on Pirandello's colligation of multifaceted dramatic and philosophical approaches in the play. Pirandello's exploitation of the stage and his truth-seeking experiments are also spotlight of this paper.

Keywords: Actors, Characters, Author, experiment, being seeing.

I. Introduction:

Luigi Pirandello is considered as one of the major innovative dramatists of the early twentieth century. His plays are generally a conversion of intellect into passion. His play 'Six Characters...' (1921) is an unusual kind of play. The stage is unset and it is technically exploited to set out the drama within the drama. By coming across the play, one can find that his notions of dramatic reality challenged at every point. It is called modern tragi-comedy. Pirandello has framed the play with the belief that- "Nature uses human imagination to lift her work of creation to even higher levels." This play was described by George Bernard Shaw as the most original play ever written.

Pirandello's concept of drama:

Pirandello's concept of tragi-comedy is vastly different from the traditional idea of tragi-comedy. The traditional idea of tragi-comedy is only meant to refer to serious play with a happy ending while 'six characters...' is produced entirely with Pirandello's personal theatrical and philosophic theories. Pirandello does not perceive life on a superficial level. Therefore he is unwilling to acknowledge the obsolete categories of good and bad, virtuous and evil, black and white that pervade in the society. He has realized that every man nurtures within him both the qualities of good and evil. But only the proportions of these qualities might differ. In the same way, he believes that every circumstance, every aspect of life has two sides – one that leads to the 'perception of the opposite' and other is resulted in the 'feeling of the opposite'. This realization of the co-existence of paradoxical elements in everyone's life has been termed as tragi-comedy by Pirandello. It is well-expressed in the words of the character of the Father who seems to be a mouth-piece of Pirandello-

"We all have a world of things inside ourselves. How can we understand each other. We think we understand each other but we never do."

Thematic element of the play:

The story contains most thinkable element but it is dramatized in the most complicated way. The father himself drives the mother to a lover. Then the mother has three more children through that lover. Eventually, the stepdaughter becomes a prostitute due to economic necessity. In the due course, the father comes to her like any ordinary client and makes love to her. Thus, the story is certainly shocking yet it is not fantastic at all. But since it is acted out by dramatically unrealized characters, it does not have a dramatic conclusion. It is clearly evident in the words of the Father who says- "when a character is born, he acquires at once such an independence, even of his own



author, that he can be imagined by everybody even in many other situations where the author never dreamed of placing him.”

Art and Life:

This play gives a brilliant demonstration of a theatrical examination of Art and Life. The Leading Actor and the Father are the mask and the face of the same person. In the same way, the Leading Lady and the step daughter are another mask and face of the same person. And when these Actors attempt to recreate that shameful scene of the dress-shop on the stage, they seem to be completely failure. It is so because the event that has mortified the father and piercingly humiliated himself- is nothing more to the Leading Actor than “an old man who has come to a knocking-shop.” The theatre -in which this Actor works in -has no concern for truth. The truth in the world of Art is basically concerned with imagination which is full of human passion and sensation. The producer says- “Everything needs to be balanced and in harmony so that we can show what has to be shown!”

Actors and Characters:

Pirandello differentiates Actors from Characters in the play. The masks and seeming, the gap between art and life, self and others are some of his primary concerns which Pirandello philosophies through this play. The Father says-

“A character can always ask a man who he is, because a character really has a life of his own, a life full of his own specific qualities and because of he is always ‘someone’ while a man-can be an absolute ‘nobody’.”

It means that Actors have their own individualities but they can never really become the characters who originate in the author’s imagination.

The conflict between ‘being’ and ‘seeing’ is problematized in this play. All that which ‘being’ is condemned to continual change and death whereas all that which ‘seeing’ is immutable and eternal both in time and space. Every work of art, every character born alive in the mind of an author and fixed in life by means of the word, seeing and on the other hand a human being who ‘being, by its very nature will be constrained to act differently, changing from day to day. In the play the attempt is double: The Father like every other character ‘is form’ but as a human symbol he rebels against the fixity of the form in which he feels himself bound. The Father suffers from having been caught in a particular moment of his life and to have been

judged solely for this. And so the premise of the play becomes the inter-relation of the actors with characters who are supposedly “beings more alive than those who breathe and wear clothes: beings less real, perhaps, but truer!” The insistence of the characters upon an independent spiritual essence, leads to a critical examination of the means of a theater based on illusion, which must nevertheless use conventions of representation that bend and distort real behavior. Nevertheless, all the characters are possessed of this dual force: as characters in themselves they *are form*-immutable and eternal- as symbols of human beings they *have form*, often fighting against the mutability of that form.

Interdependent divisions of the play:

The play contains three interdependent circles of dramatic elements.

(1) The outer circle represents the audience.
(2) The second circle represents the Actors and the Characters.

(3) In the third circle the Actors represent the Characters in the rehearsal of Characters’ story. This is verbally presented by Pirandello through the medium of the Father. He says-

“...each of us is several different people and all these people live inside us. With one person we seem like this and with another we seem very different. But we always have the illusion of being the same person for everybody and of always being the same person in everything we do.”

This is a very psychological analysis of human personality. That is why the Father tries desperately to explain to his Stepdaughter that she should not judge him by that single episode of the dress-shop.

Play within a Play:

Pirandello also brings in the concept of Meta-theatre and the ‘Play within a Play’ in a new avatar. He tries to unlock the illusion not only of theatre but of life itself, revealing its inauthenticity and absurdity, establishing the human condition pertinent during the World Wars. He explores the metaphysics of theatre itself, establishing a special relation between the illusion of theatre and the illusion of real life. Pirandello’s theatre extends the dimensions of the naturalistic and realistic exploration; he not only removes the imaginary fourth wall but lays bare the entire stage in front of the audience. The viewer becomes a part of the act, living and breathing every moment, the illusion on and off stage is fused together as we see the actors entering from the isles and the main door. When the audience enters the theatre for a performance of



Six Characters in Search of An Author, which is subtitled 'A play in the making'; they find the curtain up and the stage unset, or rather set informally as for a play rehearsal. It has been said that this entry, into the 'empty space' of the 'real theatre' was the moment that truly heralded the Modern movement in drama. The unset stage, actors rehearsing for a play, an unfinished script, the insistence that the characters wear special masks under coloured lights to differentiate themselves from the rest of the crew, the unreality of the actors' attempt at acting- all this has been called the stripping away of the theatrical illusion. In practice it is the opposite. Pirandello, actually, constructs that theatrical illusion for us, right in front of our eyes, meanwhile suggesting we too live in a similar world of illusion and 'make-belief'.

Pirandello's point of view:

The 'living' existence of the characters seems fantastic. The fact that 'they are looking for an author' might seem amusing but as we perceive the meaning of their existence and their pain of being rejected, we can be amused no longer. The characters represent all the characteristics of life including its basic truths like ambiguity, pain, frustration and even comedy. They are 'less real perhaps but nearer to truth.' As the Father says-

"The play is in us: we are the play and we are impatient to show it to you; the passion inside us is driving us on."

This is the hidden side of theatrical life and gives the audience that 'perception of the opposite' which on deep thought leads to 'the feeling of the opposite.'

II. Conclusion:

The performing aspect of the play 'six characters...' constantly proves to be very confused for the audience and the reader. The producer keeps jumping down among the 'living men' while the audience and the Actors come through their stalls. This curious and constant shift between involving the audience and distracting it gives the play a very ambiguous touch. This combination of art and life, reality and illusion keeps the audience in a daze. But the comic-serious blend in the play is perfect. Just as life is a vague mixture of laughter and sorrow, so is the play 'six characters...'

The Father says- "...life might even be as a character in a play."

Thus, the play holds the views of modern psycho-analysis and latest philosophic era. Pirandello has

called himself a 'philosophic writer' and indeed it is proved here with his theatrical experiments.

In the words of T.S.Eliot, Pirandello "has taught us something about what our problems are, and indicated directions in which their solution may be sought. He has shown us by example that the escape from the confinement of naturalist realism in the theatre need not be sought in the artificial 'poetic' or in the fantasies of a play of bloodless ideas and arid epigrams. He has had the courage and the imagination which have made it possible to penetrate 'realism' and arrive at reality".

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