UNIT 14: LUIGI PIRANDELLO: *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* I

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 Introduction

14.3 Luigi Pirandello: The Dramatist

14.3.1 His Life and Works

14.4 Context of the Play

14.5 Summary of the Play

14.6 Let us Sum up

14.7 Further Reading

14.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

14.9 Model Questions

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit you will be able to:

- gain an insight into Pirandello's early life and his development as a playwright.
- discuss the major literary works by Pirandello.
- describe Pirandello's literary achievements
- explain the factors that went into the making of the play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author.*

14.2 INTRODUCTION

In the present unit we shall take up the play filled *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by the dramatist Luigi Pirandello. Pirandello is considered one of the leading modern dramatists and had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1931 for his literary output.

14.3 LUIGI PIRANDELLO: THE DRAMATIST

Let us briefly discuss the life and works of Luigi Pirandello before we explore the text of the prescribed drama.

14.3.1 His Life and Works

Born to wealthy parents, Stefano Pirandello and Caterina Ricci Gramitto on 28th June, 1867, Luigi Pirandello began his childhood education at home which was in a suburb in Agrigento, Sicily, Italy. At an early age, Pirandello was exposed to the rich world of literature through fairy tales, legends and fables. He started composing poems at an early stage, when he was in the high school. His father was involved in the family business of running the sulphur industry. He also started working at the mines with his father when he was about eighteen years old. Pirandello wished to continue his education and so he got admitted in the University of Palermo and later in the University of Rome. Due to some disagreements with one of the tutors there, he went on to settle in Bonin where, sometime later, he was awarded the doctoral degree in 1891 for his thesis entitled, *Sounds and Development of Sounds in the Speech of Craperallis.* Pirandello first fell in love with his cousin, Lina, and after some conflict with his family, they finally agreed to the couple's marriage. But something caused them to call off the marriage.

He finally got married to the girl arranged for him, Antoinette Portulano. They had three children together. He had quite a challenging year in 1903 when his family was undergoing financial crisis and as a result, his wife started suffering from mental issues. He took care of her amidst all the financial odds but finally she had to be admitted in an asylum in 1919. Pirandello associated with a very impactful and eminent political figure of that time, Mussolini, who encouraged him to further his artistic career. He supported him

to gain ownership of the Teatro d' Arte di Roma but it was eventually closed down due to heavy financial losses that it incurred.

After achieving his PhD degree, he came back to Rome. There he got familiar with many writers and journalists. As a result of such associations, he published his first work *Marta Ajala*in 1893. He also started writing for various newspapers and journals.In 1894, he came up with a series of short stories which he published as *Amori Sensza Amore.* In 1897, he was appointed at Instituto Superior di Magistero di Roma as a Professor of Italian language. He published the weekly magazine, Ariel, in collaboration with Ugo Feres and ItaloFablo. In this magazine, Pirandello published his first one-act play, *L'Epilogo.* By 1903, Pirandello had become an established writer. His short stories and novellas had earned him much fame. The year 1903 proved itself to be quite vexing for Pirandello because of his financial crisis and his wife's mental health. At this time, writing a series, *I Vechi el Giovani,* and published its first episode in 1909, but it finally came out as a novel in 1913. The world war period was the most fertile phase for Pirandello's literary career.

He initially wrote novels but the year 1915 saw his development as a playwright. In six years produced sixteen plays. He wrote a number of plays during this phase and established himself as a playwright by the 1920s. *Henry IV* (1922) and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) were the two best plays written by him during this time that made him famous. His other notable plays are *Right You Are If You Think You Are* (1917), *Each His Own Way* (1924) and *Tonight We Improvise* (1930). Pirandello associated with a very impactful and eminent political figure of that time, Mussolini, who encouraged him to further his artistic career. He supported him to gain ownership of the Teatro d' Arte di Roma (the Arts Theatre in Rome) but it was eventually closed down in 1928 due to heavy financial losses that it incurred. Pirandello came up with the idea of 'theatre within the theatre' notion which he aptly applied in his play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* Pirandello pioneered what

he himself called the teatrodellospecchio or "the theatre of mirror" which reflected the introspective nature of the individual which was no less than any drama. He is one of the precursors of the Theatre of the Absurd with his initiation of the concept of the metatheatre (a theatre looking at itself as a theatre; or a theatre within the theatre) that gave birth to this modern tragicomedy. It is because of his innovative techniques and unconventional use of the stage which revived the Italian theatre scene that he was awarded the prestigious Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934. He died at the age of sixty-nine on 10th December, 1936.

14.4 CONTEXT OF THE PLAY

Pirandello's acquaintance with Mussolini has already been mentioned in this unit. His political perception projected a Fascist bent of mind. It was an inclination that inspired most of his earlier works. In one of the press meets, Mussolini and Pirandello even expressed their admiration for each other. With Mussolini's help, he even opened The Arts Theatre of Rome and the Fascist Regime provided grants and subsidies to sustain this theatre. This theatre company travelled all over Europe and America and Pirandello had to remain outside Italy most of the time. However, Pirandello was soon disenchanted by the fanaticism that began to show its ugly face from within the Fascist Regime. He realised that Fascism seldom had any respect for culture. His play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author,* however was written as a time when he was actively involved with Fascism. It was written and first produced in1921, the inter-war period, and aptly projects the fragmentation and disillusionment of the individual regarding the universe. Disillusionment, disintegration, loss of one's identity—they are all the outcome of modernity and to project such emotions, a new kind of theatre was most necessary. He designed such a theatre where it aimed to project, expose and question itself, and in the process, it also questioned the very existence of human and that one's identity was the most slippery of all entities and thereby, quite questionable.

The setting of this play is so adjusted that when the audience first enters the theatre, the curtains are already up and the stage is deliberately unset so as to make them think that they are, in fact, in the middle of a rehearsal. The entry of the audience and making them face an unset, almost empty stage, the actors rehearsing, unfinished dialogues, and the constant attempt of the actors to express that they are but actors and not the characters, and therefore not 'real'—are all factors contributing towards the notion that theatre is but a construct, and like any construct, this too comes with its own baggage of illusions. Through all these factors, Pirandello tries to break the illusion of theatre and simultaneously tries to suggest that it is almost impossible to arrive at any reality, because reality itself can be somebody's construct.

When the characters in this play first enter the stage, they are all wearing masks. The stage direction says, "the characters should not appear as ghosts, but as created realities, creation of the imagination and so more real and consistent than the changeable realities of the actors. The masks are designed to give the impression of figures constructed by art, each one fixed forever in its own fundamental emotion." This is what the play in question tried to assert—that an actor can only "perform" a particular role of a "character" to some extent; he/she can never fully "become" the character however much he/she tries to. Theatre is an illusion and for some time, an actor, with the help of stage space, props, gestures and speech creates this illusion of 'real' lived in a particular moment. However, Pirandello was against this illusion-making strategy of theatre and tried to expose, through theatre itself, that illusion was after all an "illusion" and could not replace reality. Identity and reality, coherence and meaningfulness, reality and illusion became problematic terms after the First World War and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* very well defines the slippery existence of such terms.

14.5 SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

The setting of the stage at the beginning is such that one would believe that a regular rehearsal is going on. The actors come to stage and feign that they are all rehearsing the second act of *The Rules of the Game,*

another play by Pirandello. The Producer goes through each scene carefully and keeps reminding the Property Man to write down the requirements of each scene. The Producer gets furious when the Leading Actor asks whether he really have to wear a chef's cap.

At that time, the Stage Doorkeeper, wearing a braided cap enters the auditorium and announces the arrival of the Six Characters. According the stage directions, 'Every effort must be made to create the effect that the Six Characters are very different from the Actors of the company' and therefore it is suggested that all six of them must wear masks with fixed emotions painted on each mask. They are—"Remorse for the Father, Revenge for the Stepdaughter, Scorn for the Son, Sorrow for the Mother"; the Little Boy and Little Girl also wear masks but they are not defined well. They are all dressed in black mourning clothes, except the Little Boy and Girl. The Producer gets angry at this sudden interference and the Father explains, with embarrassment, that they are in search of an author. He further clarifies that their author abandoned them and denied that the stage-life for which they were initially created. And it is in the hope of immortality which can be gained through the stage-life that they had come to his company. After this, the seductive Step-Daughter begins her explanation: after something really shameful between her and the Father, she can longer live in the society. Moreover, she cannot bear to see the grief of the Mother and her Son. The Producer gets confused at seeing her calling her Mother a widow, while the Father was alive. The Step-Daughter explains that she and the Little Boy and Little Girl were actually the children of the Mother's lover, who was working as a clerk under the Father. The Mother had an affair with the clerk who was a kind, understanding man. The Father realised this affair, but could not bear the exchange of glances between them. The Son was the child of the Mother and the Father and he stayed back with the Father, as the Mother went away to stay with the clerk. The Father kept vigil on the Mother's outside family and watched the Step-Daughter, as a child, go to school and return home. After the clerk died the Mother's family faced a difficult time due to poverty, and without the knowledge of the Father returned to the same town. There was also no contact between the Father and the

Mother's outside family for some years. The Mother in order to make a living, started working as a seamstress at Madame Pace's establishment. The Step-Daughter also used to do small tasks under Madame Pace. However, Madame Pace also ran a brothel simultaneously and wanted to pull the Step-Daughter into this business. Madame Pace designed the contract between the Step-Daughter and a man, who was actually the Father who had come to her as an unsuspecting client. Just when the immoral act is about to begin, the Mother enters the scene and seeing her daughter undressed before the Father, she lets out a scream. The Father is ashamed and in order to make up the disgrace, he takes the Mother's family into his own house. The Son is embittered because a whole new family has been imposed on him.

The Father then gestures something to the Son, whose expression remains cruel throughout the play. It is so designed that the Mother will once again enter the house with her other family. Since the Son will make her family feel awkward and alienated, the child (Little Girl) will die, the Little Boy will shoot himself with a revolver and the Step-Daughter will flee.

The Producer gets interested in the Six Characters and allows the Actors (the company actors) to take a twenty-minute break. He himself goes into his office with the Six Characters. After twenty minutes, the stage bell rings and the Step-Daughter appears on the stage with the Little Boy and Little Girl. She grieves over the death of the Little Girl whodied by drowning in the fountain and provokes the Little Boy to showhis revolver. She further says that that had she been in his place, she would have shot the Son and the Father.

Everyone comes up to the stage and the Producer orders it to be prepared for rehearsal.The Father becomes confused at the reason that they themselves are not allowed to appear on stage before the public. The Producer explains that it is the work of the actors to act. He realises that Madame Pace is missing from the scene. The Father asks the female Actors to hang their hats and other accessories on the set's pegs for hanging clothes. Just then, Madame Pace appears from the side, tempted by the articles. The Leading Actress disapproves of a 'vulgar act' to take place on

stage. Madame Pace's scene with the Step-Daughter begins and when the other actors urge them to speak louder for the audience to hear, the Step-Daughter replies that such matters could not be discussed loudly since the Father might hear them. Madame Pace comes forward and says in her peculiar accent, "Yes indeed Sir, I no wanna take advantage of her." The Producer finds elements of comic relief in her interruption. The Father carefully greets the young prostitute and wishes her to buy a new hat, but the lady protests saying that she is mourning. The Producer then wants the same scene to be carried out between the Leading Actress and Leading Actor, to which the Father protests. The Step-Daughter cannot stop her laughter and the Producer complains that he cannot rehearse anything with the author present on stage. He then directs the Father to continue the scene. He directs that when the Step-Daughter talks about her grief, the Father must reply, 'I understand'.

The Step-Daughter protests that the Producer must not try to convert it into a sentimental romantic piece and urges him to allow her to present it in the exact same manner since the actors of the company could twist it the way they wish the next day when they are gone. The Producer agrees to it and directs the curtain to fall after this scene, but it falls with the Father and the Producer exposed before the audience while the rest of the actors remain behind it. The curtain again rises, exposing anew scene—a garden fountain and trees. The Step-Daughter comes forward and tells the Producer that the whole scene does not actually take place in the garden, to which the furious Producer protests saying that he cannot have the setting changed thrice or four times for a single scene. The Leading Actress only suggests that this makes the 'illusion' a lot more convincing. The Father ponders upon the word 'illusion' for quite some time. He stops the Producer for a moment and asks him who he really is—a character can ask this to a man because he is already assigned a role, but a normal man might be the product of all his past illusions. The Producer becomes furious and commands him to stop his philosophical musings like an author. The Producer again starts preparing the scene.

The Step-Daughter leads the Little Girl to the fountain. The Producer directs, "Both at the same time", meaning the Second Lady and the Juvenile Lead closely study the Mother and the Son. The Son refuses to act before a 'mirror' that not just 'freezes us with the image of ourselves but also throws likeness back at us with a horrible grimace.' He also complains that there was no scene between the Mother and him; he simply went out in the garden after the Mother had gone to the room to speak to him. He then saw the Little Girl dead in the fountain and the Little Boy was standing beside it, statuesque. A gunshot is heard from behind a tree where the Little Boy is hidden and some say that the Little Boy has shot himself. Others say that it is only 'pretence' and mere 'make belief'. The Producer becomes furious, shouting, "Make-belief? Reality? Oh, go to hell the lot of you!...God! I've never known anything like this! And we've lost a whole day's work." All the Actors appear on stage, except the Little Boy and Girl (they being dead) and the Step-Daughter runs away, laughing hysterically, suggesting that it was written in the script that she would flee at the end.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. State whether the following are True or False:

a. Pirandello's father was involved in the sulphur industry.

b. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1937.

c. The Six Characters appear on the stage with masks on their faces.

d. The Little Boy drowns in the garden fountain and dies.

Q2. Fill in the blanks with appropriate answers:

a. Pirandello's wife suffered from…

b. Pirandello befriends the popular political figure…

c. Pirandello's PhD thesis was entitled …

d. With Mussolini's help, Pirandello opened the …



14.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed about the contribution made by Pirandello to the literary scene, especially, theatre. In the summary of the play, we notice that there are two tests working simultaneously, one script is played out by the company's actors while the other play is carried out by the Six Characters. There are two circles of audiences: the company's actors form the inner circle of audience who keep watching the Six Characters perform and the real or outer circle of audience who watches the two sets of actors perform, often interacting with each other. This play is a serious critique of the play productions that were going on during Pirandello's time and it shows his disapproval of the naturalistic drama that tried to create the fourth wall or the screen of illusion between the actors and the audience. When the Six Characters are shown wearing masks, it suggests immediately that the roles assigned to each actor is immutable and therefore fixed. The Characters are destined to meet their end as written and directed in the script.

That is why, when the act is replayed, the destinies of the two little children cannot be changed and so does the fate of the Step-Daughter who is destined to flee. The audience is made to question the character's role—whether it is just a moment of make-belief or is it real? The power of the author is also indicated in the play, where even in his absence the Six Characters cannot act on their own and must carry on with their destined roles. Thus, Pirandello's play is about play and productions and is suggestive of the notion that whereas the script which is written is real and fixed, when it is performed, it acquires a different dimension. It is not epistemologically possible to arrive at any conclusion regarding the text or script. The presence of the script in this play shows that it is realistic play, which is always script-dominated. However, when there is the distortion of the fourth wall in the impromptu performance of the actors, it becomes a critique of the realistic play.



14.7 FURTHER READING

1) Bassanese, Flora A. *Understanding Luigi Pirandello.* Columbia: University of South Carolina P, 1997.

2) Bassnett, Susan and Jennifer Lorch.eds. *Luigi Pirandello in the Theatre: A Documentary Record.* London: Routledge, 2013.

3) Herrick, Marvin T. *Tragicomedy: Its Origin and Development in Italy, France and England.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962.

14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1 : a. True, b. False, c. True, d. False

Ans to Q No 2 : a. mental issues

b. Mussolini

c. *Sounds and Development of Sounds in the Speech of Craperallis*

d. the Arts Theatre of Rome



14.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Discuss the context of the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author.*

Q2. Why is Pirandello's theatre termed as "the theatre of mirror"?

Q3. Discuss the devices designed by Pirandello to break the illusion of theatre in his stage direction of *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* Illustrate from the text.