UNIT 15: LUIGI PIRANDELLO: *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* II

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit the learner will be able to:

- provide an insight into the major themes of Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and enable you to grasp the playwright's theatrical techniques.
- analyse the theatre space and how Pirandello made use of it in manifesting his ideas and how it reached his audience.
- gain a detailed analysis of the major characters in the play that mouthed some of Pirandello's own concerns regarding the realistic theatre and his critique of it.

15.2 INTRODUCTION

The previous unit has already acquainted you with Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and has provided you with the summary. This unit aims to give you a detailed observation of the factors that bind the

play together, like—major themes, characterisation and language. One interesting thing about this play is that it does not have the conventional characterisation that was popular in realistic drama. Pirandello's technique can be likened to what Bertolt Brecht called the *verfrumdundseffekt* or the alienation/estrangement effect, that is, the distancing of the audience from the actors on stage. Like Brecht, Pirandello too was against the identification of the audience with the emotions played out on the stage. His technique tries to do away with the fourth wall or the screen of illusion between the audience and the characters, and tries to establish that the characters are after all actors feign to be somebody else for a moment through pretence and make-belief. The following sections will clearly illustrate Pirandello's theatrical take and his critique of realistic drama.

15.3 READING THE PLAY

Let us discuss some of the important aspects pertaining to the play

15.3.1 Major Themes

Reality versus Illusion/Make-Belief/Pretence: In Pirandello's play there is constant tussle between what is real and what is illusory. Pirandello's attempt at breaking the conventions of the realistic theatre comes to the fore through this tussle. Naturalistic theatre has often been explained as realistic drama in its extremity. It is an attempt at removing the fourth wall completely for the audience to see that the characters are after all actors playing roles for a given time period. When the audience first enters the stage, it is empty with the company's actors rehearsing in full view of the audience. This is a deliberate attempt of Pirandello to make the audience ready to accept that they are about to watch a performance which is not real. The performance is the reality of the characters but not the actors; the characters will last only till the play lasts, but the actors are forever and therefore, their performance is not their reality.

The Six Characters have two important functions to serve—first, they are inside their character by being the 'characters' and by

performing their assigned roles; second, they are outside their characters when they put aside their 'character' and describe about their characters to the Manager. Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright and practitioner of naturalistic drama, was reported to have said, "The great task of our time is to blow up all existing institutions—to destroy", and the proscenium theatre being actually a frame, a construct that generates illusions was the first thing to be destroyed by the naturalistic dramatists. The Characters are the result of the absent author's imagination, and therefore they are fictive but when they approach the Company Manager to allow them to perform their own story to gain immortality through stage-life (because characters live only on the stage and not outside it, unlike actors), their fictional nature comes under scrutiny and they become real people of flesh and blood.

The Mask versus the Face: Pirandello's use of the mask for the Six Characters show a very important side of role-playing; it suggests when an author designs a character, its role is pre-destined in the author's imagination. There is an interesting specificity related to the mask—it is both restrictive and liberating. The realistic theatre, therefore, would not use the mask. Pirandello makes it clear in the stage direction when the Six Characters first appear before the audience that the expressions on each mask must portray a particular emotion—that defines the rigidity of the characters. But when each time, the Step-Daughter comes forward to tell about her history, she is walking out of it. In Act Two, when there is a reenactment of the revelation scene of the Step-Daughter and the Father at Madame Pace's Hat shop, the Mother's face shows "sadness, anxiety, horror: sometimes she turns her face away and sobs"—if she is wearing a mask, it will not show. Perhaps, a painted face would show such transitions more appropriately. The Son's facial expression remains static throughout the play. The masks indicate that the script is a permanent thing and can seldom be altered. When the Producer asks the Leading Actor and Actress to

watch them carefully and then repeat their action, the masked Characters, especially the Father and the Step-Daughter, express their disapproval of such poor imitation, because according to them, The Company Actors will only perform the Characters' roles, and thus, their performance may be shallow. But since the Characters have come out directly from the script, their roles are authentic and immutable, just like the expressions permanently etched on their masks, unchanging and therefore, genuine.

Six Characters in Search of an Author as a Tragicomedy: This particular play seems to encapsulate Pirandello's pessimistic approach towards life that—life is, after all, a maze that can hardly be understood at a deeper level. Just like the theatricality of this play is a complex structure with the ever anxious Producer's panic situations that provide some comic relief, life is also humour and comedy at the surface level, but deep within, there lie pain and anguish. The inability of the Six Characters to break free from their assigned roles and that they have to enact and re-enact the same situations over and over, and with that, they are destined to suffer eternally give the play its tragic edge. But the Producer's constant panic attacks, the superficial behaviour of the Leading Actress and even the accent of Madame Pace supply humour to the play.

After the drowning of the Little Girl and after the suicide of the Little Boy, when they do not return to the stage along with the remaining four of the Six Characters, the Producer "jumps off the stage, terrified" because the Characters did do justice to the script, but at a deeper level, they did it by staking the lives of the little children. They are pre-destined to meet their doom thus, as the author had planned. When the Producer insists the Father to make little changes here and there, the Father answers with hurt in his voice: "But ours don't change! Do you see? That's the difference! Ours doesn't change, it can't change, it can never be different never, because it is already determined, like this forever, that's what's so terrible! We are an eternal entity…" The pain of being frozen in a particular role

becomes inexplicably painful for the Characters and this provides a tragic edge to the play.

The Idea of Meta-Theatre: Meta-theatre is a kind of theatre that insists on the notion that theatre is pure performance or make-belief and it is not life, and in meta-theatre, the drama develops through the questioning of each other's (life's and theatre's) authenticity and illusions.It lays bare not only the reality of theatre but also of life itself. Similarly, it exposes the illusions of stage-life and real life and established that neither of the two is free of illusions. This is the reason why Pirandello's technique is called the theatre of mirror because it reflects the inadequacy of theatre that tries to justify life, and at the same time it also holds up a mirror to life that claims to be real, since it comes with its own baggage of illusions.

Six Characters in Search of an Author has two scripts: one, with the Producer and the Actors of his Company which is Pirandello's other play, *The Rules of the Game*, and two, is with the Six Characters writtenby an absent authorwho refuses to give these characters a stage-life. Their script does not have a title. At the same time, there is the umbrella script, that is, this play itself—*Six Characters in Search of an Author.* Similarly, there are different sets of audiences, let us call them circles—the first circle is formed by the audience (including us) who goes to watch the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author;* the second circle consists of the Producer, the Manager, the Company's Actors and Actresses who intently watch the performance of the Six Characters; the third circle again consists of the members from among the Six Characters who watch their fellow characters perform while they watch them and often react to them, because their performance is closely and personally related to them.

Pirandello's technique provides the space to analyse the workings of the stage and it also enables one to critique the dichotomy between what is real and what is illusory. Just like the Father philosophises, it becomes a paradoxical situation to tell the real from

the fictional—supposing that the characters are an author's fictional product and in that sense they are fictional or illusory. But characters are fixed entities and they act out their roles genuinely at the given moment and therefore they are more real than the actors who only play out a particular role and in the next script, they become another character. *Six Character in Search of an Author* is a meta-theatre proper in the sense it opens up such discussions in the conversation between the Father, The Step-Daughter and the Producer andeach of their individual viewpoints is brought to bear upon the understanding of the theatre and the illusion that theatre is believed to create. A number of theatrical limitations are discussed between the Father and the Producer—what is role-playing for the actors is real for the characters, and this point delineates the inadequacy of the efforts of the actors to accurately 'imitate' the characters.

15.3.2 Major Characters

The Father: The Father is the most important of all the Six Characters. He is not just a character, but he goes beyond his role and becomes the spokesperson for the author's own concerns regarding the original-imitation dichotomy. Though pain and anguish, the Father describes the eternal bondage of each character to a particular role. He resists any kind of romanticising to take place in the play. He wants to send across the message that the performers are not real and that they only pretend to make us believe that they are real. In the midst of putting forward his theatrical and philosophical arguments, his personal drama somewhere gets undermined. But it is owing to this very nature of the Father that the drama develops and some of the author's (and Pirandello's) own view of the theatre get highlighted through the Father's character.

The Mother: The Mother is the wife of the Father who develops an illicit relationship with a poor clerk working under the Father. The Mother and the Father have the Son as their only child, but when

she goes away to stay with the clerk, she gives birth to three more children, the Step-Daughter, the Little Boy and the Little Girl. The Father at that time keeps vigil on the parallel family of the Mother and often watches the Step-Daughter as a small girl going to school. But after some years when the clerk dies, the Mother has to work her to sustain herself and the three children. There is no contact between the two families and the Mother has to come to town along with her children to work as a seamstress under Madame Pace in her hat-shop. The Step-Daughter turns eighteen by that time and she also assists her mother in Madame Pace's business. However, Madame Pace runs a brothel and wishes to take advantage of the Step-Daughter's poverty and push her into prostitution since she is pretty and young. The first client that she lures into the shop is the Father, who is unsuspecting.

He could not recognise the Step-Daughter after so many years. He asks her to undress and she is in the mourning black dress because of her father's (the clerk) death. It is at that decisive moment that the Mother enters and the revelation shatters everything and the whole tragedy ensues. She refuses to enact the scene of revelation of the Father and the Step-Daughter in Madame Pace's shop because she does not wish to go through the pain once again. It will also mean the re-enactment of the death scenes of the two of her younger children. A character does not die; he or she is an immortal entity, unlike the actor or the author who created it. A character dies only when there is his/her death written in the script. Hence, the pain of the character is also eternal. This pain is seen in the face of the Mother.

The Son: After the moment of revelation, the Father is disgraced and wants to make up for the embarrassment he has caused to the Mother and the Step-Daughter. So, he takes the whole family to live with him in the same house. The Son is an embittered youth of twenty-one and cannot accept the arrival of a whole new family to live with them together. He has always felt neglected by the Mother

who had left him to stay with her new family of a husband and three children. He always wears an air of scorn and indifference that troubles the Mother, because she wants to love him, as he is her first-born child, but his indifference causes a lot of suffering for her. The Step-Daughter says: "She tortures herself, she exhausts herself with worry and all because of the indifference of that son of hers.

She wants to make him believe that she abandoned him when he was two years old because the Father made her do it." He is a cynical young man who does not want to get involved in the drama, as is clear from his words: "...I'm not prepared to do anything…Nothing happened. I got away! I wasn't going to get involved. I never have been involved. Do you understand?"—a clear cut use of a pun, indicating that literally and figuratively he did not and was not involved by the author to get involved. It was the Step-Daughter who involved him in the family drama. That is why he dissuades the Father and Mother to enact their personal drama: "…Do you want to parade our disgrace in front of everybody? Well, I've nothing to do with it! Nothing! And I'm doing what our author wanted as well—he never wanted to put us on stage." By not getting involved and in his hesitation to live the stage life, he wants to remain loyal to the author who did not wish to stage them in a play.

The Step-Daughter: If we carefully read the play, most of the drama is created by the arguments generated between the Step-Daughter, the Father and the Producer. She is the character who is trying constantly to give a gist of herself; it is through her that much of the family's history comes to the fore for the audience. At every little moment,the Step-Daughter has her moments of high-drama which is deliberately done to give the effects of a melodrama and to critique it later on. She insists on the reenactment of that shameful scene, much against the wishes of the tormented Mother, because the telling of the tale is her way of avenging the Father's behaviour with her; she is a character and cannot take revenge herself without the author's approval or his/her design, but a character is made of words and phrases and not flesh and blood, like those of the actors.

The Producer: Much of the drama is created by the interaction between the Producer and the Father. It could also be drawn that this play is an experimental done by the Father and the Producer to critique the play production of the time. While the Producer struggles to get the actors of his Company rehearse and perform well before the audience, his work is interrupted by the entry of the Six Characters who strangely want to enact their personal drama to live the stage-life and achieve immortality. The philosophical discussions of the Father on life and theatre are often underpinned by the abrupt and comic questions of the Producer. The arguments between the Father and the Producer provides the matter to this meta-theatre and the Producer often finds himself caught in a philosophical trap created by the words of the Father.

The Author: The absent author is an important character in this play. He remains absent throughout, but frequent references are made to him by the Father, the Step-Daughter, the Producer and the Son. The Six Characters acknowledge that they are the products of the author's imagination and therefore, cannot change anything in the script; they must remain loyal to their ole and justify them on stage. This is how theatre semiotics works, the presence of the 'absent' author is made more poignant by the constant allusion to him and his script.

The Little Boy and the Little Girl: Along with the Step-Daughter, they are the children of the Mother with her lover, the clerk. They do not have a voice in the play but play important parts in it. The Little Girl dies by accidentally getting drowned in the Father's garden fountain. They are the worst sufferers of the broken family and when they go to stay with the Father and the Son,the Little Boy has to face the coldness and indifference of the Son (his step-brother) which causes him hide behind a tree and shoot himself. To show that their deaths are real, when the personal drama of the Six Characters is over, all come on the stage before the audience except these two. Their deaths were written in the script and so they cannot return on the stage.

Madame Pace: She is a female pimp, who employs the Mother in her hat shop to work as a seamstress, but she simultaneously runs a brothel. She wants to take advantage of the Step-Daughter's poverty and tries to usher in prostitution. She makes up the meeting between the Father and the Step-Daughter in her hat shop. It is through her presence that the play achieves its moments of high-drama. Although she stands outside the Six Characters' paradigm, yet she is the external instrument who creates rapture in the Characters' lives and gives their lives a twist. She is an important episode that pushes the drama to an unexpected revelation and finally to its tragic climax.

Other Actors and Actresses of the Company: The other actors and actresses of the Company, including the Leading Actor and Actress, are crucial to the development of the argument in the play. They are instrumental in making what Pirandello planned this play to be—a meta-theatre. They are directed by the Producer to watch the drama of the Six Characters carefully for them to perform better; but each time they attempt at re-enacting a scene, it is either the Father or the Step-Daughter who interrupts saying that their performance is not satisfactory because they are distanced from what actually happened to the Six of them, and therefore, their performance cannot be convincing as that of the Six Characters. The presence of the company's actors also helps in the formation of the second circle of audience and with its presence, the critique of realistic play productions becomes all the more pronounced. Their presence also provide moments of comic relief to the play during intense scenes in the personal drama of the Six Characters.

15.3.3 Language

In order to understand this play, an understanding of the theory of Hermeneutics is necessary. It is a branch of knowledge that began with the interpretation of the Bible and later on, of other texts. There may be different interpretations of the same text, as in other literary

or religious texts. Language, by its very nature, is polyphonic and multiple and it has no intrinsic meaning of its own. It is through an accumulation of interpretations and understanding that a language gains its meaning. Therefore, no simple meaning of language is possible.

To show the proliferation of meaning in language (here, the theatrical language) *Six Characters in Search of an Author* opens up different nuances at each stage. There are primarily two texts in the play—one, the framed play (Pirandello's play) and two, the text that comes via the Six Characters and take over Pirandello's play. It is not epistemologically possible to arrive at any conclusion regarding the text or script of this play. The presence of the script shows that it is a realistic play, which is always script-dominated; but when we see the distortion of the fourth wall in the impromptu performance of the Company's actors, it becomes a critique of the realistic play.

An important pointer of how theatre language works is—the author is not present even once in the play, but his presence is always felt and this is possible in the Six Characters' allegiance to the script and how they cannot be free and act on their own, showing that a character is always script-bound.

Another important illustration of how theatre semiotics works is shown in Act Two of the play. Madame Pace has not arrived till then since she is not a part of the family or the Six Characters' troupe and the Father asks the actors to lend him some accessories like, 'a hat, a coat, a scarf, or something' to make up for Madame Pace's presence. Such illustrations can be found in abundance in Shakespearean plays where there was no light effect or sound effect to produce visuals for natural events like storms or rain—the script had to depend solely upon the use of language to produce the effect of such phenomena.

Six Characters in Search of an Author is therefore an experiment of the power of language and how it can be manipulative in the understanding and interpretation of the text.

15.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The play was first premiered in 1921 by the Compagnia di Dario Niccodemi (The Company of Dario Niccodemi) at the Valle Theatre in Rome. The play was received with mixed reactions—while the admirers appreciated Pirandello's theatrical techniques, the critics and opponents forced the author and his daughter,who was present among the audience for the premiere, were forced to leave the theatre through a side exit. Its next premiere was in Milan which was a huge success. The play has been produced a number of times in the American Broadway and Off-Broadway productions by Princess Theatre (1922), Street Theatre (1924), Bijou Theatre (1931), Phoenix Theatre (1955), Martinique Theatre (1963). In other parts of the world it has been produced in the Westminster Theatre of London (1931), the Little Theatre (1948), the American Repertory Theatre (1996), the Minerva Theatre (2008), the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (2011), the Chopin Theatre in Chicago (2012), New England Youth Theatre (2016). The play has also been adapted in Urdu language and was recently produced by the National Academy of Performing Arts, Karachi Pakistan, in 2014, and in French by Theatre de la Ville-Paris in 2014. All these productions and adaptations of the play show its calibre to appease theatre enthusiasts who love to see experimental drama and acknowledge theatre not only as entertainment but also as a cerebral exercise.



CHECK YOUR POGRESS

Q3. Fill in the blanks with appropriate words:

a. Pirandello's theatre is also called ..... for its self-reflective nature.

b. A theatre that comments on and critiques its own development is known as…....

c. The Father becomes the mouthpiece of the ..... in his expression of some of the play's shortcomings.

d. In temperament, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is a .....

e. The branch of knowledge that deals with the interpretations of a text is known as…....



15.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have seen how the plot, structure and the characterisation provide unique features to this play. You have also come to understand the use of theatre language and how a written script acquires a completely different meaning when it is executed on stage. This unit also illustrates Pirandello's own take on the conflict between reality and illusion and how neither of the two can be taken at face value. In this unit, we have also seen what 'meta-theatre' is and why *Six Characters in Search of an Author* can be called a meta-theatrical experiment.



15.6 FURTHER READING

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15.7ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: a. Theatre of Mirror b. Meta-theatre c. Author/ Pirandello d. tragicomedy e. Hermeneutics



15.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Comment on the characterisation, plot and structure of the play and how they help to develop Pirandello's argument on reality and illusion.

Q.2. Throw light on the conflicts between the Father and the Producer and how they help in building up the argument between real life and stage life.

Q.3. Can this play be considered as a tragicomedy? Provide incidents from the text to support your answer.



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