

A tenuous light:  
analyzing the creative  
process through six  
characters in  
search ...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Pirandello's *Six Characters* is a play that tries to explain the creative process to the audience. The author used his characters to personify the various stages of a playwright's writing process, while framing the action against the convenient backdrop of the stage. His characters most closely correlate to Freud's structure of the human psyche, focusing mainly on the unifying characteristics of the superego, ego, and id (Merkur 31). However, Pirandello never explains that his characters are allegorical, and simply presents them to the audience as creations of "the instrument of human fantasy" (Pirandello 6). He also indulged in hints of dark humor found throughout the play, which only masked the characters' true meanings even further. The audience is left with the feeling of fragmentation, as even the Manager is unsure whether the characters are real or not. Most importantly, the one character that could make sense of it all, The Author, is maddeningly absent. Nevertheless, while the play may have been a precursor to the Theatre of the Absurd movement, it does have meaning: *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is an allegory for a playwright who is struggling to bring his characters to light.

Before the entrance of the *Six Characters*, Pirandello prepares his audience by setting the scene for a play-within-a-play. The stage is set up to give the appearance of incompleteness, a hint at the fractional nature of the play. While the Manager struggles to control his cast, the audience is allowed to glimpse the often-comedic complexity of the creative process. By the time the stage door opens to reveal the *Six Characters*, Pirandello has already begun to create the backdrop of uncertainty for the play. However, upon entering the stage, the character of the Father quickly works to establish a

credible reason for his existence, appealing to the troupe's artistic sensibilities. In this way, Father's speech is directed toward the audience as much as it is meant for the other players on stage, while he positions himself as the chief narrator. First, he proposes that the characters' existence can be explained by accepting the human psyche as an actual plane of reality, where characters are doomed to roam without purpose until given life by an Author. At this critical moment, Pirandello courts the audience's disbelief with logical fallacy, as Father begins to construct a plausible scenario in which he may exist: "life is full of infinite absurdities, which, strangely enough, do not even need to appear plausible, since they are true" (Pirandello 5). Relying on this bit of abstract rationale, the author offers a reason for his characters' presence. Instead, Pirandello vaguely posits that characters who have been subjugated to the realm of imagination have the "inner passion" to be written (9). Thus, while the author has taken pains to explain the appearance of the characters, with one line of dialogue he completes the play's setting by using subterfuge rather than exposition.

With his background established, Pirandello gradually develops the plot in narrative flashes, often interrupted, as the characters recount their dramatic history. The embattled family's depictions of the events are contradictory at best, and the conflicting perceptions seem to highlight their disjointed natures. The characters do not dispute the events themselves, but rather the motivation behind them, while the actual truth remains a mystery. Father, portrayed as a hyper-rational and philosophic narrator, most nearly resembles the superego of the human psyche. Though each character represents a stage in the creative process, Father is the foremost example of

this personification. He is one of the more tenacious characters in the family's attempt to have their story acted out, and throughout the retelling of the drama, Father incessantly defends each of his decisions with tortuous rationalization. Freud's structure of the superego is characterized by a predominant sense of morality, and conjunctly, guilt. As the play progresses, it becomes apparent that Father, driven by both motivators, desperately wants his version of the story to be told. However, this only further ties him to the superego: "A confession not only gratifies the confessant's wish for punishment...but in localizing guilt in one subject, it allows those who sit in judgment to displace and then satisfy their own need for punishment" (Schmeiser 333). Father's dialogue is peppered with implications of these tendencies: "All my life I have had these confounded aspirations towards a certain moral sanity" (Pirandello 17). By indulging his moralistic affectation, Father exemplifies how, within the creative process, the superego tends to dictate the editing and manipulation of the story.

In sharp contrast to Father, Stepdaughter unquestionably portrays the id in Freud's psychological construct. Stepdaughter is prominent for her sexual characterization, and for her unrestrained laughter. No less than six times throughout the course of the play, Stepdaughter's hideous laughter is silenced by one of the other characters, which continues to accentuate her primal disposition, as well as her disconnection with reality. Stepdaughter consistently responds to every admonition with pained martyrdom, but still embraces the sexual tendencies that mark her allotted aspect of the psyche. Like the id, Stepdaughter is fascinated with the visual elements of the story, and frequently interrupts Father's account with only marginally pertinent

information about the visual context of the tale. Her descriptions of Madame Pace's shop, the pale blue envelope, and her attire as a schoolgirl all point to her obsession. Unruly and unashamed, she is Father's foremost antagonist in *Six Characters*. Stepdaughter consistently contradicts Father's perception of the events, and casts doubt upon his illusion of morality. While Father rationalizes each of his motives, Stepdaughter is content to throw the whole, sordid tale before the Manager, as she casts her stepfather in a very grim light. Ultimately, she is the character who captains the action of the plot and insists on pushing forward to each new and forbidding scene.

Mother rounds out Freud's trinity of motivators. Signifying the ego, Mother has the tendency to play the mediator between Father and Stepdaughter. She embodies emotion, filling in the details between the pretentious rationalizations and the bitter, unrestrained laughter. Mother weeps for the victims of the creative struggle, her discarded children. She is responsible for development, giving birth to new aspects of the story; as Father points out, "Her drama...lies, as a matter of fact, all in these four children" (11).

Together, Stepdaughter, Mother, and Father symbolize inspiration, development and creativity in the creative process: the playwright's Holy Trinity. However, the Manager plays a crucial role as the editor of the tale. While Father, Mother, and Stepdaughter present the raw details of the story, the Manager is tasked with organizing this stream-of-consciousness narrative into a tolerable play. The characters argue against the Manager's edits, but he responds with a simple statement: "Truth up to a certain point, but no further" (51). At the abrupt conclusion of the play, it becomes obvious that without the edits of the Manager, this story is a senseless mess.

Nevertheless, the characters arrive in search of an Author, and not a manager. At Father's insistence that the Manager become the Author, the Manager replies, " I have never been an author" (26). Regardless, the Manager tries to put the characters' action in writing, but is hopelessly confused without the inspiration and guidance of the Author.

The absence of an Author in the play is significant because it is the greatest indicator of the play's allegorical intentions. According to Father, it seems that their Author struggled with their story, and ultimately gave up: " the author who created us alive no longer wished, or was no longer able, materially to put us into a work of art" (8). Thus, the characters may present themselves, carrying their drama with them, and the Manager may try to edit the pieces of the story into cohesion, but without the Author, it is unclear whether any part of the creative process is pretense or reality. The Author's absence could be metaphorical; a suggestion that the Author's imagination has stalled. The imagination, " the instrument of human fantasy," is the portal that connects the Author to his characters, and vice versa. This is why the characters have grown impatient with the Author, and arrive on the stage searching for " any author" (5). Since the Author has failed to write his characters alive, their story is fragmented, like forgotten ideas that still exist in the Author's subconscious. From the allegorical perspective—with the stage representing the Author's mind, and the characters acting as separate aspects of his psyche—these ideas could " exist," waiting for an Author to complete them. Thus, the characters' story seems unfinished and condensed, just as they are, while the most pivotal moments are played out in vivid detail. This theme of fragmentation is

highlighted by the confusion expressed at several key points in the play by the Manager and Actors.

Pirandello's conclusion to the play, when taken at face value, seems pointless and absurd. However, through the lens of allegory, it appears that Pirandello's Author would never return to finish writing his characters. The Manager's dismissive line, "Pretense? Reality? To hell with it all!" (72) echoes the Author's disillusionment with the creative process, and indicates that he has given up on his characters, ultimately failing in his struggle to bring his characters to light. This failure is not without some internal protest: Father, the dominant voice for the characters, cries out, "Reality sir, reality!" (72). The simple exchange of dialogue in the midst of violent commotion is what gives the play a discernable ending: the allegory concludes with the Author abandoning his characters and snuffing out their tenuous light of existence.

## **Works Cited**

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