

Evolution or a brand
new species?:
determining the limits
to which authors can
ch...



The nature of evolution is change, continuous instances of reaction to what has come before. Therefore, literary history is defined by change as well. The great authors are those who questioned the accepted conventions of their time and altered them in a way that later became the norm. In some cases such questioning simply altered an existing form, but at times it has led to the creation of an entirely new genre or form of literature. Exemplary of this is the rise of the novel, a form which came into definite existence within the past few centuries. In the early phases of its development it was often viewed as a bastard child of other forms of prose, inferior to and destructive of, “purer” forms rather than as a viable option itself. Over time, however, it has become a respected and exceedingly popular literary form in its own right. Similarly, within the past several centuries authors have begun to question the conventions of theater to a degree to which they had not previously been challenged. It is even arguable that such reactionary theater at times goes beyond traditional convention to the point where it can no longer be considered theater itself. *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, by Luigi Pirandello, is exemplary of this. The play begins with a rehearsal for another play, complete with all the actors, the director, the prompter, and the technicians. Soon, however, they are interrupted by six characters searching for an author to write their story into a script. Eventually the director agrees, convincing the characters to act out scenes from their story so that his actors can rehearse them. There prove to be far more difficulties with transferring them to theater than had been expected, however. In many ways, *Six Characters* seems like a staged critique of theater, even an outright attack on it. It lays the artificiality of the theater completely bare, not only revealing at various times all of the tricks employed to mimic reality

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- lights, set, rehearsal – but even drawing the audience’s attention to the impossibility of theater to accomplish its supposed goal. Theater is meant to mimic real life. Real life, however, is full of implausibilities, ones that humanity accepts without a quibble because they are true. In theater, however, everyone involved must toil endlessly in order to convince the audience that what they are portraying is plausible and, therefore, a convincing semblance of reality. Theater, therefore, is madness, and those who participate in it mad. The Father character explains this to the Director, thereby exposing it to the audience as well. When the Director angrily asks him, “ So then, our profession is for crazy people, according to you?” he answers, “ Sure, to make what is not true appear true without a need to do so: a kind of game” (Pirandello 12). The ability of theater to show real life becomes even more impossible because of the individualized nature of existence. In reality there is no author determining which bits of whose lives are significant. In reality each person experiences life completely differently from everyone else, and for him or her different occurrences have differing degrees of importance and meaning. Therefore, to put on a play is to rearrange the reality of every character. When the Stepdaughter character tries to leave the theater, upset that her greatest moment will not make the script the Director is writing, he tells her, I’m sorry to have to tell you that yours is not the only part...You can’t have a character invading the scene and becoming so dominant that he overpowers the others. All of them have to be contained in a harmonious framework and then act out what isactable. I too am well aware of the fact that everyone has his own interior life which he would like to bring out into the open. But the difficulty is precisely this: to bring out into the open only what is important in reference to the others; and

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at the same time reveal through that little bit all of that unrevealed interior life! (Pirandello 49) Therefore, Pirandello shows the audience the extreme folly of the very concept of theater. It is not simply that it can never properly reflect reality but that it is, in fact, nothing like reality at all. Yet, at the same time, he explains to them what it is about theater that draws people. It is not that the audience sees reality on stage but that they see something more true and more meaningful. This construction of supposed reality around a central plot gives life and the humans who live it order and purpose. The Father character explains to the Director that “ A character...can always ask a man who he is. Because a character truly has a life of his own, marked by his own characteristics, because of which he is always ‘ someone’. On the other hand, a man...can be ‘ nobody’” (Pirandello 55). Audiences are comforted by theater’s depictions of life as something logical and true, peopled by humans with stable identities and clear purposes, but it is simply a façade. So can *Six Characters in Search of an Author* still be considered theater? The entire work is devoted to deconstructing both the physical and conceptual elements of theater, with the all the dialogue of the play centring on the philosophical dispute between the characters and “ real” people. The author even stipulates that the actors playing the “ real” people should be called by their real names instead of providing character names for them, and they are the only ones instructed to improvise at times, allowing them to present themselves as much as possible rather than characters. Then too, he does not respect the space of the stage, constantly breaching the imaginary boundary between actors and audience by having characters run through the aisles and enter and exit through the literal doors of the theater, the ones which lead outside. Therefore, it could not be any less theater without <https://assignbuster.com/evolution-or-a-brand-new-species-determining-the-limits-to-which-authors-can-challenge-conventions-of-theater/>

being clearly something else entirely. Yet, for all its reflexivity, it does have characters, action, a script, a set, lighting, rehearsal, costumes, a ticket booth, two acts to allow for intermission, and it is very entertaining. The story which the characters have to relay is dramatic, charged with an Oedipal sexual tension, and the interaction between the Director, actors, and characters is fascinating. Therefore, despite its biting meta-theater, it must be concluded that it remains theater itself. It is perhaps akin to Alexander Pope's "On Critical Theory." Though extremely self-reflexive in discussing the proper construction of poetry, and though it may in some ways be considered a hybrid between poetry and critical theory, it cannot be denied that it is, itself, a poem as well. Therefore, in the same way, though *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is very much a work of critical theory, it is simultaneously a very good play. Upon reaching such a conclusion about *Six Characters*, it seems pre-determined that Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* would qualify as theater as well. Unlike in *Six Characters*, the actors in *Godot* do not breach the fourth wall. Also unlike in *Six Characters*, the word "theater" is not used once in *Godot*. Though the play questions conventions of theater, it does so mainly by example, by presenting a play which does not conform to such conventions, rather than through direct philosophical argument. The action in the play consists of two men, Estragon and Vladimir, waiting under a tree for Godot to come. In each act two other men, Pozzo and Lucky, happen to venture by their tree and interact with Vladimir and Estragon for several minutes before once again departing. At the end of each act, a boy appears to let Vladimir and Estragon know that Godot is not coming. This is the entirety of the action that occurs in the play. There is no tight plot or even continuous thread of conversation topic that moves the

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play forward, and the beginning and end are indefinite. Nor does it provide deep character sketches or even witty repartee. The characters are quite cartoonish and child-like, while their dialogue often seems completely nonsensical. By contemporary conventional standards, it is appalling. Martin Esslin explains in "Introduction: The Absurdity of the Absurd," "Inevitably, plays written in this new convention will, when judged by the standards and criteria of another, be regarded as impertinent and outrageous postures" (27). Therefore the majority of the well-educated rejected *Godot* when it was first put on. It was too alien, departing too far from their conventional vision of theater. Over time, however, the elite came to recognize the theater of the absurd as highly intellectual and deemed it something one must be well-educated to fully appreciate. Yet when presented to the inmates at a prison in San Francisco, it was understood immediately. Not only did the men enjoy the play, but they recognized the symbolic meaning of *Godot* and the desperate actions of the waiting men. Esslin writes that this surprising reception occurred "perhaps because they were unsophisticated enough to come to the theatre without any preconceived notions and ready-made expectations, so that they avoided the mistake that trapped so many established critics, who condemned the play for its lack of plot, development, characterization, suspense, or plain common sense" (27). Therefore, though *Waiting for Godot* questioned conventions of theater, it is not a departure from theater itself but simply from the contemporary style of theater to which it was a reaction. When presented outside the culture that established such conventions it is a successful piece of theater, as it is in today's culture. Of the three authors here discussed, Brecht, despite the fact that he is both famous and infamous for his radical theories, is perhaps the easiest to

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reconcile as remaining within the defining limits of theater. Since the publication of his works, he has become a seminal literary figure, calling for theater that breaks the audience's suspension of disbelief, thereby forcing them to examine the intellectual issues raised by each play rather than simply being swept along by the suspense and emotion of them. According to Brecht, theater must challenge the intellect of the audience, creating through this "alienation effect" sufficient distance from the world of the play that audience members are forced to use their critical faculties and reach their own conclusions concerning the issues raised by the performances. One way in which Brecht realizes this is his use of masks in the tradition of oriental theater. Unaccustomed as Western audiences are to such masks, they appear strange and highly artificial, thereby enhancing audience member's recognition of the play as artificial and creating an emotional and intellectual distance from the plight of the characters. Another technique is frequent direct address. For example, the characters often address the audience in the middle of their dialogue with another character. This sometimes happens at the height of a tense situation, thereby slowing down the action in order to force the audience to consider the intellectual issues at work beneath the emotional turmoil. For example, in one scene Yang Sun's mother appears and says to the audience, "I must describe to you how the wisdom and discipline of our universally respected Mr. Shi Ta turned my son Sun from a broken wreck into a useful citizen" (Brecht 83). This has a startling effect on audiences. Though characters in earlier plays had often had internal dialogue with themselves aloud, Brecht here allows every character, not just a narrator as mediator, to see the audience and speak directly to them. Audiences are used to participating in the assumption that

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they are seeing a window into reality and, therefore, the characters are unaware of their existence. Here, however, rather than the characters as the object of the audience's gaze, the audience becomes trapped within the gaze of the characters as well and is forced to realize their own participation in the horror and unfairness of life as portrayed by *The Good Woman of Szechwan*. Therefore, fourth wall is breached, but only conceptually. The actors physically remain on the stage. There is also a quickly moving plot with plenty of action, and the characters are given depth. Therefore, Brecht's work remains an enjoyable piece of theater and is all the more stimulating for its unconventional techniques which force rational consideration of itself upon its audiences. Perhaps the only play here discussed that is truly crafted in a way that it may not be considered theater is Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. This is because, rather than simply questioning contemporary traditions of writing and acting, it defies the most basic principles that have defined the concept of theater throughout history. There is only one character and nothing that can be described as a plot. A man simply sits and listens to a recording of himself at a younger age, occasionally interjecting. Even the story of his life as told by his younger and older selves is heavily fragmented and difficult to follow. The majority of the sentences are incomplete. Its theatrical value appears to reside in the beauty of the words and its ability to convey the emotion of loss. In almost every way, then, *Krapp's Last Tape* seems to have more in common with a dramatic poetry reading than a play. Perhaps the only difference is that the man on stage, rather than appearing as the author and narrator, instead appears in order to attempt to embody the character whose life is displayed through the words.

It is the character rather than the narrator speaking. Yet many modern lyrics
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have no narrator outside the character from whose perspective the poem is written. Indeed, it would seem one can only conclude that in Krapp's Last Tape the conventions of theater are finally questioned so far that the "play" is not theater at all. It may be considered drama if there is a distinction to be made. Theater, however, it is not. Therefore, while it is possible to challenge convention to an astonishing degree while remaining within the framework of theater itself, as demonstrated in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and, to a lesser degree, in *Waiting for Godot*, and *The Good Woman of Szechwan*, there is a point at which such a challenge is forced outside theater itself in order to do so. One such point is Krapp's Last Tape.