



WORLD LITERATURE II (ENG 252)

Six Characters in Search of an Author: Study Guide

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MODERNISM: ART'S RESPONSE TO THE FRAGMENTATION OF EVERYTHING

The twentieth century developed as a period of questions and doubts about practically everything, including the physical world itself, as scientists discovered the subatomic particles and mostly empty space that underlay the seeming solidity of matter.

Human beings, too, came into doubt, as Sigmund Freud and his followers discovered and explored the unconscious, breaking down the belief in a single, solid and knowable personality for each human being. The nature of knowledge itself came into question as Einstein's theory of relativity suggested that what one could observe and measure was a function of where one was while observing. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle was even more disturbing, since it asserted that the very act of observing distorted what was being observed. It no longer seemed likely that human beings were on their way to knowing everything about a clear and rational universe.

New Areas of Uncertainty in the 20th Century

the physical world	the discovery of sub-atomic particles
human nature	Freud's discovery of the unconscious
the nature of knowledge	Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle
the value of progress	two world wars, nazism, fascism, communism and other destructive isms of the 20th century
the value of science and technology	more destructive weapons, massive pollution, destruction of the environment

The value of progress, a nineteenth century ideal, came under fire, as people observed the chaos wrought by two world wars, nazism, fascism, communism and other destructive isms of the 20th century.

Even science, that beloved discipline of the 19th century, came under suspicion, as people observed the misuses of science and technology to create more destructive weapons, massive pollution, and the destruction of the environment.

In brief, many of the ideas that had seemed so certain in the 19th century no longer could be trusted in the 20th. This led to forms of art and literature that dealt with the fragmented ideas, images and values of their times.

Modernist artists responded to this new and disturbing sense of a world made up of unreliable, constantly shifting bits and pieces, by experimenting with new forms to reflect and express this new vision of reality.

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SIX CHARACTERS -- A MODERNIST PLAY

Six Characters in Search of an Author, by Luigi Pirandello, creates a powerful vision of this fragmented, modern world. It deals with the bewildering issues of human identity, the search for meaning where there is none, and the confusion between art (the imaginary, yet eternal and unchanging) and life (the "real," yet transitory and always changing). By the end of ***Six Characters***, we are almost persuaded to let go of our own fixed identities as the Father asks the Producer (and all of us): "Just think about it....Do you really know who you are?"

Six Characters breaks down the distinction between what is real and what is imaginary from the moment when the six characters walk into the theater and encounter the actors and producer as fellow living beings. Indeed, Pirandello makes a pretty convincing case for the characters being more real than the actors, since the characters will always be the same, while the actors (and all other people) will shift and change identities and eventually die.

The Father expresses this idea (and indeed, most of the ideas in the play):

FATHER:...I only want to make you see that if we...have no other reality outside our own illusion, perhaps you ought to distrust your own sense of reality: because whatever is a reality today, whatever you touch and believe in and that seems real for you today, is going to be--like the reality of yesterday--an illusion tomorrow.

This is the shaky reality of human beings, for whom yesterday is only a memory, perhaps an illusion, whereas the characters have an eternal sameness, because their reality never changes:

FATHER: But ours doesn'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, for ever, that's what's so terrible! We are an eternal reality.

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SIX CHARACTERS AS AN EVENT

According to Anne Paolucci:

"There was nothing to prepare the European theater for the open-ended, shattered stage of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* ... where character appears as a series of superimposed attitudes, states of mind, emotional outbursts not always predictable or clear in the usual motivation/intention/action sequence. This play...is a restructuring of the stage to make way for the new relationship between actor and role, actor and audience, actor and script. The Ibsenian notion of the well-made play is forever shattered....It is not hard to understand why Brustein has called Pirandello 'the father of the contemporary theater,' the single source for all the exciting novelty of the Theater of the Absurd...and beyond."

It is difficult for us to realize just how radical Pirandello was in his time, because we have lived our lives entertained by the plays and films and books of the modernists and post modernists. However, Pirandello, like many truly creative artists, was indeed a revolutionary in his day.

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PIRANDELLO'S BIOGRAPHY

Pirandello was born in Sicily in 1867. His father was a prosperous sulfur merchant. Pirandello studied at the University of Rome and received a doctorate in Romance Philology in 1891 from the University of Bonn. In 1894 Pirandello married, and he led a comfortable life for ten years, until his father's business collapsed and Pirandello had to earn a living. Even worse, much worse, his wife became insane with a jealous paranoia that lasted until her death in 1918.

Pirandello wrote prolifically and by the nineteen-twenties, he was considered a major European dramatist. Pirandello received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934. Unfortunately, from my point of view, along with his distinguished career as an author, Pirandello was also an enthusiastic admirer of Mussolini and a long term member of the Fascist Party. In 1935 Pirandello donated all of his personal gold, including his gold Nobel Prize medal to the Fascist government to help pay for the invasion of Ethiopia. He died in 1936. (Norton 1463-5; Poupard 279, Gassner, 659)

Personally, I am quite troubled by the political aspect of his life, but Pirandello was an important and innovative writer as well as, or despite, his role as a Fascist. I think donating the Nobel Prize Medal to support the invasion of another country was

despicable, although I do not readily see any clear connection between Pirandello's politics and his plays. Because of his importance as a modernist playwright, Pirandello is certainly worth studying, even though each reader will probably want to think about Pirandello's political life as well as about his life as a dramatist.

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TRUTH, IDENTITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

A nexus of issues that are crucial to Pirandello's writing focuses on the interrelationships of Truth, Identity, and Responsibility. As the literary critic Joseph Wood Krutch points out, in *Six Characters*:

"...even within the framework of the play within a play, everything is almost equally dubious. The various characters see the various events, and especially they see one another, in various lights. The playwright remains neutral. One character is not right, or sane, or logical, and the others somehow wrong. There is no assumed version of things "as they really are" because no one, not even the playwright, could know what that version is even if it exists." (81)

Not only is there a not a real and knowable version of existence, but, as Krutch goes on to comment:

"...the assumption that "I am I" and that "You are You" is one of the most fundamental which we make--because it seems self-evident to us, not only that the realities exist but also that they persist, so that the "I" of today and the "I" of yesterday are in some way continuous no matter what developments may occur. Upon this assumption all moral systems must rest, since obviously no one can be good or bad, guilty or innocent, unless he exists as some sort of continuous unity." (78)

Of course, *Six Characters* denies just this sort of "continuous unity" of the self. The Father uses this denial to avoid moral responsibility for his relations with the Stepdaughter, who blames him for his near-incest with her. The Father objects:

She accidentally found me somewhere I shouldn't have been, doing something I shouldn't have been doing! She discovered a part of me that shouldn't have existed for her: and now she wants to fix on me a reality that I should never have in my life. (Norton, 1483)

So much for responsibility. If one aspect of my personality is not bound to each and every other aspect, if I am not a single whole, then why blame me for the actions of one of my many parts? Go blame that part, but you can't, because it all happened yesterday, and yesterday is long gone. This is a pretty disturbing interpretation of human responsibility, but it is certainly at the heart of Pirandello's play. This denial of connectedness, and hence, responsibility, may also be a key to Pirandello's ability to write as a humanist, while applauding the Fascist state--perhaps he did not connect one event with another, but took each in its moment. I have no answer to this--it is only a question that comes to my mind, but you might want to think about it too.

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BACKGROUND: HOW THE STORY DEVELOPED

Pirandello explains in his "Preface to Six Characters," how the characters simply appeared to him, unbidden:

"...I found before me, alive--you could touch them and even hear them breathe--the six characters now seen on the stage. And they stayed there in my presence, each with his secret torment and all bound together by the one common origin and mutual entanglement of their affairs....Born alive, they wished to live." (Bentley, 363)

However, although he tried, Pirandello was not able to create their story to make them live and wished to let them go. But, the six characters were already living their lives as characters who craved becoming a story, so finally Pirandello decided to make a play about the characters wanting to be made into a play.

"I wanted to present six characters seeking an author. Their play does not manage to get presented--precisely because the author whom they seek is missing....

"....I have...accepted and realized them as rejected: in search of another author.

"What have I rejected of them? Not themselves, obviously, but their drama, which doubtless is what interests them above all but which did not interest me....

"And what is it, for a character--his drama?

"Every creature of fantasy and art, in order to exist, must have his drama....This drama is...necessary for his existence.

"In these six, then, I have accepted the "being" without the reason for being...." (Bentley, 368)

This existence of being, without reason for being, is an eternity of torment for the six characters, who seek another author to create their story, the way human beings seek God, to give meaning and form to their lives. The eternal nature of their suffering reminds me of the sinners caught in Dante's *Inferno*, being tormented forever for sins which remain forever the same. Indeed, the characters speak of the eternal nature of their misery, which the Mother expresses in her role of eternal sorrow:

MOTHER: No! It's happening now...it's happening all the time. I'm not acting my suffering!...I'm alive and here now but I can never forget that terrible moment of agony, that repeats itself endlessly and vividly in my mind. (Norton, 1499)

And the Father expresses the the eternal nature of his misery in his role of eternal remorse:

FATHER: The eternal moment....She is here [Indicating the STEPDAUGHTER] to keep me too in that moment, trapped for all eternity, chained and suspended in that one fleeting shameful moment of my life. She can't give up her role and you cannot rescue me from it. (Norton, 1500)

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MASKS

Six Characters has echoes for me of the tormented sinners in Dante's *Inferno*, because of the eternal nature of the characters' suffering; it also has echoes of the old Italian tradition of the *Commedia del 'Arte*. *Six Characters* suggests in the stage directions that the characters use masks to designate their eternal quality as opposed to the transient "naked faces" 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; that is, Remorse for the FATHER, Revenge for the STEPDAUGHTER, Scorn for the SON, Sorrow for the MOTHER." (Norton, 1471)

Similarly, the masked characters of the *Commedia* stood for simplified, intensified, eternal characters--the clown, the scoundrel, the fool. We discussed these a bit when studying *Tartuffe*, which picked up this Italian *Commedia* tradition, and here it is again, in the twentieth century, showing the same thing--eternal types--for a very different purpose--to show how unreal, finally, ordinary human beings are when contrasted to characters of the imagination.

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