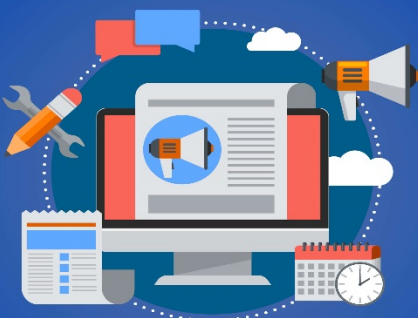


ISSN 0976 - 8165



# THE CRITERION


AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

11<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access


**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed  
Open Access e-Journal**

**Vol. XI, Issue -4 (August 2020)**

Editor-In-Chief : Dr. Vishwanath Bite  
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**ISSN 2278-9529**  
**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## “What is Real?” Projecting ‘Art’ versus ‘Life’ in Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

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**Article History:** Submitted-09/07/2020, Revised-17/08/2020, Accepted-18/08/2020, Published-31/08/2020.

### **Abstract:**

Human life is in a constant state of flux. There is a problem with every individual because we individuals do not have a fixed personality. We keep on evolving from time to time. Thus, every individual has a double-faced identity and with this comes varied experiences of different people. The varied experiences thus give rise to versions of a single truth. The world is in a constant state of change, with various experiences and varied life-states, the point of view too differ from every individual to individual. Hence, truth is always subjective. Due to the various experiences one faces, everyone has a different version of reality for themselves. Luigi Pirandello in his play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) undertakes this study. This paper analyzes the dichotomy of art versus life in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

**Keywords:** Art, Life, Real, Surreal, Theatre.

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” (Albus Dumbledore. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*)

### **Introduction:-**

Human life is not permanent. There is a problem with every individual because we individuals do not have a fixed personality. We keep on evolving from time to time. Thus, every individual has a double faced identity and with this comes varied experiences of different people. The varied experiences thus give rise to versions of a single truth. This is what Nietzsche too argues in his philosophy regarding truth and its constituency. Nietzsche argues that truth is nothing but an ‘illusion’ in itself. The world is in a constant state of flux, with various experiences and varied life-states, the point of view too differ from every individual to individual. Hence, truth is always subjective. Due to the various experiences one faces, everyone has a different version of reality for themselves. Hence there is multiple

phenomenon of the same context. This is what Luigi Pirandello too has to offer to the readers and audiences in his play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). Pirandello presents a dichotomy that seems surreal in its existence but forces the readers and audience to question on the nature of reality, existence and what is true in life. Thus Pirandello seems to blur the border line between ‘reality’ and ‘illusion’ by bringing the characters of a play in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* out of the imaginary realm directly towards a stage full of not only other characters but the audience at large. All he wants to project is the fact that situations create reality. For the readers or the audience, the characters are mere objects that exist only in a world of fantasy or imagination. But this is not true in case of the characters. They are real in their own world and since the authors have created them in their imagination, they grow, act, talk and walk just like real people in life. Arundhati Roy had once tried to define the ‘real’ and the ‘fictional’-

“What counts as reality?... after all, you did experience it in your imagination...and that can be more real than reality. If you have an imagination that feels the pain or joys of others, isn’t that real? I don’t know. Given the great debates about our identity and representation, this is a huge question, of huge consequence to a writer of fiction.” (Roy, 2016)

What Roy picks up from the above point is the question of reality coupled with existence. According to Roy, if something is imagined in the human mind, it becomes an experience to that person and thus can be said to be a real force of existence at least in the mind of the person who has imagined it. Luigi Pirandello in the play in itself gives us a diversified perception of the single phenomenon. However, one main argument of the play is the dichotomy of the ‘real and the imaginary’ or the dichotomy of ‘art and life’. The play poses serious questions on the existence of life and the role of art. Is art real or is life real? Since life is temporary and art is permanent, so which one is closer to reality is the question we readers form in our mind after reading the play.

### **Discussion:-**

In May 1921, the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* was premiered in Rome. But the play did not entertain the audience as general plays would do. It in fact baffled the audience. Pirandello had to take refuge from the mob that stood outside the theatre. This was largely because the play was absurd in its form. Largely taken to be a part of the Absurd Movement in theatre, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* deals with themes as bizarre and

absurd as a strange platter served in front of the audience. By the time Pirandello started his work on this play, Europe had already discarded the seeds of Romanticism and ideal life thought. After the World War I had taken a toll on the people and surroundings, human experience changed on the greater scale. This finds a voice in the literature of the time. Pirandello being a follower of the 'Verismo Movement' in art and literature (which can be regarded as the European version of Realism and Naturalism) propounded the ideas of realism on the stage as opposed to the romantic seeds that were propounded during the earlier ages. *Six Characters in Search of an Author* deals with the reality of the characters and their real existence. Thus it blurs the romantic notion that characters belong to art. It is the interplay of the dialogues of the actors, characters and the director that the stage becomes a platform of debate.

This paper analyzes the dichotomy of art versus life in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Since the play brings the 'imaginary' into existence therefore, the play can be read from Bakhtin's concept of 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' force that he propounds in *Discourse in the Novel* (1975). According to Bakhtin, the centripetal force is single and monologic whereas the centrifugal force opposes the monologic point of view and is decentralizing in nature. In the play, the director and actors stands for the centripetal force because according to them 'life' and 'art' are different entities. Whereas, the characters are the opposing force, the centrifugal force which states that art is closer to reality. Thus from the Bakhtinian point of view, the play can be judged as a 'polyphonic drama' that puts forward the view points of the actors and characters and rejects the monologic view point that characters are fictional only. Thus Pirandello's play is rich and challenging on both intellectual and emotional levels.

Literature always brings in the debate of the real and the imaginary. What is being written might not be real in the actual sense however we cannot say that they are unreal. The authors create the characters and they are brought to life on the stage by the actors who play their role in front of the audience under the direction of the producer or director of the play. Thus actors are said to give substance and existence to the characters. This question is raised by the father when he questions the director-

Father:           Isn't it your job to give life on the stage to imaginary people? (12)

In this play however, the actors and characters come closer. The characters are more authentic and thus are different from the actors. But the actors, since they belong to life, keep

on evolving from time to time. This is their naturalness. But the characters are universal, although their representation may vary across time and space. Let us take the example of Shakespeare’s Hamlet (the character). Hamlet will remain Hamlet throughout the world although characters that represent Hamlet on stage may vary across space. Thus art is more static and so are the characters. But this is not true in case of the actors who represent life.

Pirandello focuses on the role of the characters how they are frozen over a period of time with a single emotion. They can laugh at death because they are the timeless creation of an author. Thus the father says, “Because a character will never die! A man will die, a writer, the instrument of creation: but what he has created will never die.” (14) The characters are static and hence they are closer to reality than the actors. But the actors are in a constant state of flux. Human beings and the chief characteristic of human beings is the ability to grow and develop. Every living being on this planet evolves from time to time be it physically or mentally. Since actors are human beings, they grow and hence change is persistent. They belong to life, they breathe and since they grow continuously, they are very real. With time the self changes because it gathers new experiences from life. They learn from the past experiences but never remain static. To learn means to grow and to grow means to evolve and gain new dimension of the self every day. Hence change is constant in case of the actors. All living beings have a form that grows and dies and thus life perishes but this is not the case with art. Art itself is the form. Therefore, art is more real than life because it gives permanency to existence. Art once produced, never undergoes any change which is faced by humans in daily life. Art is fixed and has the power of immortality. The first instance of this dichotomy is depicted very aptly by John Keats in his celebrated poem ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. According to Keats,

“O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Here Keats brings in the superiority of art over life. The urn stands as an example of how art can be immortal. This idea finds voice in many other writings as well, one such example is W.B. Yeats' 'Byzantium' where the golden bird, though is a piece of art, yet has achieved immortality and is more closer to life because it is constant.

“Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,  
 More miracle than bird or handiwork,  
 Planted on the starlit golden bough,  
 Can like the cocks of Hades crow,  
 Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud  
 In glory of changeless metal  
 Common bird or petal  
 And all complexities of mire or blood.”

Here Yeats too wants to overcome all the complexities of 'mire and blood' by becoming an art piece in Byzantium.

In the opening of the play we come to see how the stage is set for the actors to rehearse the play "*The Rules of the Game*" written by Pirandello. The actors take their place and the director is about to take an account of the proceedings when all of a sudden the six characters rush to the spot. They address themselves as 'characters' which differentiates them from the actors. Pirandello introduces the six characters on the stage- the Father, the Mother, the Step-daughter, the Son, the Boy and the Little Girl. As soon as they enter the stage, the father remarks "We're looking for an author" (11) and according to him, they have brought a "story of anguish" along with them. Hence from the first scene itself, Pirandello sets in the theme of art and life- a layer of confusion in the minds of the audience. The search for an author has led the six characters in the stage in order to find an author and gain justice for their lives. These characters insist that since they are the author's imagination who created them and abandoned them, they must be allotted space in the theatre and look for someone who can give them a final solution.

Pirandello, in order to differentiate the 'actors' from the 'characters' makes the use of masks. These masks give the characters a static identity of their own. In real life, although we may say that we are an individual and we look upon our fellows as solid, clear and singular entities, yet in reality, we are infinite. We have multiple personalities. According to Pirandello, we humans too wear a mask which we change eventually in different situations.

But these masks are metaphorical. Because we have our inner lives as well and we are aware of our inner self and existence. Thus these masks are considered to be inappropriate. In the play, the father has a mask that is of repentance and guilt. But his mask is considered to be inappropriate by the father because it was imposed upon him by the step-daughter. Thus we have multiple perspectives of the same situation. According to the step-daughter the father is the main cause of the family’s tragedy because he was engaged with a physical relation with the step-daughter at Madame Pace’s shop. According to the mother, the father is to be blamed for sending her along with the assistant of the father. But the father has a different version of the story. He thinks he is not the cause of the troubles that has befallen the family.

Father:           We think we understand each other, but we never do. (21)

He was a victim of his temptations and he did not know that the girl at Madame Pace’s shop was his step-daughter. Moreover, he sent away his wife with the assistant because he felt that she would remain happy in his company. It is the characters’ reality that will and that can never change. According to the director, reality is a matter of flux. It always changes. But the father refutes this statement by saying-

Father:           But ours doesn’t change! Do you see? That’s the difference!...it can’t change, it can never be different, never, because its already determined, like this, forever.” (64)

Thus the drama is a play-within-a-play where the actors who gives life to the characters, takes a back seat. The father exclaims that since they are creations of the imagination, they are closer to life. Nature uses human imagination to create something which can also be real at times.

Father:           I want to try to show that one can be thrust into life in many ways, in many forms: as a tree or a stone, as water or a butterfly- or as a woman. It might even be as a character in a play. (13)

This comment of the father on the reality of art seems surrealistic. The stage is a medium through which the author’s imagination stretches its wings and takes a flight and thus the characters gets a life of their own. Thus the division of art and life is further blurred.

Conventional theatres always use illusion to depict the situations of life. In the words of Coleridge, it is the ‘willing suspension of disbelief.’ Thus the real becomes the illusory.

This is clear from the views of the director who states that the theatre, the script and the characters, i.e., art itself is illusory. “That’s what we do here, create an illusion for the audience.” (61) The concept of art and life is made more complex when in act II, the director decides to set up the stage for the authors to perform the characters’ story in which Madame Pace’s parlour setting is to be made. According to the director, “It’s actors who act here. The characters are in the script.” (37) But the characters refute the idea. When they are laughed at their existence and termed as mad and insane by the actors, it is the father who comments on the reality of their existence.

Father:           A character my dear sir...has a life of his own, a life full of his own specific qualities and because of this, he is always ‘someone’. While a man in general...well, he can be an absolute ‘nobody’. (63)

Thus, the father protests the mode of existence. Not only the father but the step-daughter also rebukes because for them their existence is real. The actors and the audience receive a shock when Madame Pace arrives at the scene out of nowhere and the characters relive the point where the step-daughter was physically assaulted by the father. Moreover, the actors are further afraid when they come to know that the Little Girl and the Boy vanish from the scene after the characters announce their deaths. So we are forced to think the dichotomy between illusion and reality. If these were illusionary narrations then how can they become a reality and vanish from the scene? Thus, Father claims that in this temporal world, as time changes, reality also changes. Therefore the word ‘illusion’ which the director uses to define the characters and the stage, according to the father is derogatory.

Father:           What for you is an illusion you create, for us is only reality. (62)

### **Conclusion:-**

*Six Characters in Search of an Author* thus captures the very essence of life as well as art and is transformed to the audience on the stage. The debate over art and life has been a serious topic in literature and Pirandello, through his dramatic talent tries to showcase this matter on the stage and bringing the very problem to the audience and making the audience question on the very essence of their existence, life, growth and permanency. The play at the end questions on the palpability of human existence on this earth. Are we real? Pirandello raises questions regarding the complex issue. The play forces us to think about the question- Are we close to life? If we are in a constant state of change and flux, how do we define our



real existence? And the final question we ask ourselves, if art is real, who are we? Thus the play is a complex phenomenon on the debate of life and art.

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