

Luigi Pirandello: Six Characters in Search of an Author and Henry IV

Pirandello was born in Agrigento, Sicily, in 1867. He studied at the universities of Rome and Bonn, and in 1893 settled in Rome and tried to make a career as a writer. At first he thought of himself as a poet, but then turned to fiction, and by 1922 had written over two hundred short stories. He continued to write stories occasionally all his life. In 1916 he had his first major success as a dramatist with *Right You Are!*. *The Rules of the Game* followed in 1918, and it was not until then that Pirandello began to earn enough from his writing, at the age of fifty-one, to be able to give up his work as a school teacher.

It was *Six Characters*, in 1921, which brought him international fame. In the following year came his masterpiece *Henry IV*. In 1923 he visited Paris and New York to assist with productions of his plays. In 1925 he became artistic director of a new theatre company in Rome, with which he travelled widely in Europe and South America over the next three years. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1934, two years before his death.

Like his predecessors, Ibsen, Strindberg and Chiarelli, Pirandello was primarily interested in exploring the nature of human personality, the inability of people to understand or cope with the truth about themselves, their need to rationalize everything. Human happiness seems everywhere to be based on illusions, games, masks, which it would be fatal to destroy.

Pirandello's ideas are not particularly deep or original. What makes him a major dramatist is the extreme theatricality of them as expressed in plays. Starting from the assumption that

All the world's a stage;
And all the men and women merely players

he is able to use every aspect of theatre to dramatize the unstable reality, almost unreality, of life itself. Life is a stage on which each of us acts out a drama with him or herself as hero. Human life would be formless and meaningless unless the individual can play a part he invents for himself and interpret the actions of others as supporting parts in the same play.

Six Characters in Search of an Author

Six Characters begins in a theatre with a rehearsal in progress of Pirandello's latest play, *The Rules of the Game*. The rehearsal is interrupted when a family of six wanders in off the street demanding that their story be made into a play to be put on instead. But they cannot agree as to what that story is. For the father it is the story of his own tragedy; for the daughter the story of her violation by her father and is to constitute her revenge upon him. These two characters are very articulate and persuasive, A very different story could be told by the silent passive mother. And the child who commits suicide does not understand himself the nature and cause of his anguish. Pirandello had in fact invented and then abandoned these characters, unable to see how to reconcile their conflicting demands. Each character has in some way gone beyond the capacity of art to resolve his or her predicament. The theatre cannot handle private and inarticulate grief (the mother), the painful shyness and dumb suffering of the boy, the aloof silence of the older son, the excessively vocal, verbalized self-lacerations and self-justifications of the father, or the

shrill maliciousness of the daughter without injustice to one or other of them, and without degrading their suffering by translating it into the melodramatic clichés the audience would be familiar with. The impossibility of making their story into a coherent and meaningful play is an image of the impossibility of communication and understanding between people in life. The living man has no fixed identity in his own eyes. What he does today he can forget or repudiate tomorrow. He has a degree of existential freedom to choose and change. But the ordinary man is likely to experience this freedom as nausea. The Father says to the director:

Don't you feel the ground sink beneath your feet as you reflect that this 'you' which you feel today, all this present reality of yours, is destined to seem mere Illusion to you tomorrow?

To be saved from that flux, he wishes to be a character in a play, with a fixed role and identity and significance. But once the author has accepted responsibility to set down this fixed role in a text, the character loses all freedom to change or protest. The living man has no role or purpose, but a character in a play is locked for ever in a role which, since it has to be defined not in terms of self-justification, but in terms of the requirements of the play as a whole and of the other characters, all of whom have different, but equally selective and unjust, definitions of him. The father says:

My drama lies entirely in this one thing. . . . In my being conscious that each one of us believes himself to be a single person. But it's not true. . . . Each one of us is many persons. . . . according to all the possibilities of being that there are within us. . . . And we see this very clearly when by some tragic chance we are, as it were, caught up whilst in the middle of doing something and find ourselves suspended in mid-air. And then we perceive that all of us was not in what we were doing, and that it would, therefore, be an atrocious injustice to us to judge us by that action alone.¹

Drama here for Pirandello performs the same function as death in Sartre's *In Camera*, it suspends existential freedom. The dead man and the character in play are both fixed in the opinion of others with no possibility of redemption. The director tells the characters:

All the characters must be contained within one harmonious picture, and presenting only what is proper to present. . . . Ah, it would be all very pleasant if each character could have a nice little monologue . . . Or without making any bones about it, give a lecture, in which he could tell his audience what's bubbling and boiling away inside him.

You might get something like justice if you happen to be Hamlet, but what if you happen to be Rozencrantz or Guildenstern, who get the worst of both worlds, neither the freedom of real life, nor the justification of art.

In his preface to the 1925 edition of the play,² Pirandello acknowledges the close parallel between being a dramatist and being God. He gives his characters being without a reason for being. He rejects them. And if his role were to be explained to them, they would not believe him:

It is not possible to believe that the sole reason for our living should lie in a torment that seems to us unjust and inexplicable.

¹ Quotations are from the translation by Frederick May, Heinemann Educational Books, 1954.

² Reprinted in *Playwrights on Playwriting*, ed. Toby Cole, MacGibbon & Kee, 1960.

Anything which is 'unjust and inexplicable', without meaning, is absurd. Absurdism is not simply a label for certain plays written in the fifties and sixties. It was a major component in Greek thought and Greek tragedy. Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* is pure absurdism, where neither Troilus nor Cressida get to tell their stories, and the Trojan War itself is drained of meaning. Chehov's plays were all, as we have seen, absurdist; and *The Seagull* even has an ultra-absurdist play-within-a-play.

The definitive expression of absurdism is within a play, but also uses theatre as its primary image:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

In 1903 Bertrand Russell also used dramatic imagery to express his sense of an absurd universe:

And Man saw that all is passing in this mad, monstrous world, that all is struggling to snatch, at any cost, a few brief moments of life before Death's inexorable decree. And Man said: 'There is a hidden purpose, could we but fathom it, and the purpose is good; for we must reverence something, and in the visible world there is nothing worthy of reverence'. And man stood aside from the struggle, resolving that God intended harmony to come out of chaos by human efforts. And when he followed the instincts which God had transmitted to him from his ancestry of beasts of prey, he called it Sin, and asked God to forgive him. But he doubted whether he could be justly forgiven, until he inverted a divine Plan by which God's wrath was to have been appeased. And seeing the present was bad, he made it still worse, that thereby the future might be better. And he gave God thanks for the strength that enabled him to forgo even the joys that were possible. And God smiled; and when he saw that Man had become perfect in renunciation and worship, he sent another sun through the sky, which crashed into Man's sun; and all returned again to nebula. 'Yes', he murmured, 'it was a good play; I will have it performed again'. [*A Free Man's Worship*]

Pirandello also indicts God for creating sentient beings and denying them a purpose in his image, in the final paragraph of his preface, of the playwright as *deus absconditus*:

Though the audience eventually understands that one does not create life by artifice and that the drama of the six characters cannot be presented without an author to give them value with his spirit, the Manager remains vulgarly anxious to know how the thing turned out, and the 'ending' is remembered by the son in its sequence of actual moments, but without any sense and therefore not needing a human voice for its expression. It happens stupidly, uselessly, with the going-off of a mechanical weapon on stage. It breaks up and disperses the sterile experiment of the characters and the actors, which has apparently been made without the assistance of the poet.

The poet, unknown to them, as if looking on at a distance during the whole period of the experiment, was at the same time busy creating – with it and of it – his own play.

Henry IV

Pirandello's Henry IV is not, of course, Henry IV of England, or even France, but an eleventh century German king and Holy Roman Emperor. The entry in my encyclopedia reads:

Henry IV (1056-1106), famous as the opponent of Pope Gregory VII in the investiture controversy. The conflict over Henry's right to appoint bishops led him in 1076 to depose Gregory, who proceeded to excommunicate Henry. In 1077, however, Henry did penance at Canossa but was then dethroned by the German princes. Again excommunicated, he entered Rome, deposed Gregory, and nominated the antipope Clement III by whom he was crowned emperor.

The gradual release of such information is part of the dramatic structure. Nevertheless, the play is difficult to follow for those who have not read it beforehand, (even, perhaps, for those who have).

'Henry' (his real name is never revealed) was a young man of 26 in 1901, and a member of a rather decadent and frivolous set of wealthy and bored aristocrats. He differed from the rest in being much more self-conscious, intelligent, serious, scholarly, imaginative and diffident. He finds himself living among people quite prepared to take life at its surface value, to assume that the lives they lead, all masked by themselves or others, believing what they believe for no better reason than that they believe others believe them. But he is tormented by the refusal of life to accommodate itself to human consciousness and ideals, to be contained and formalized. Because of this he was treated by them as something of an eccentric and outsider, with some respect but more mockery. His greatest passion was for acting, but he seemed distanced from his own life and emotions by treating them like another part, which he could view and evaluate from the outside.

'Henry' admired from afar a very beautiful but flighty young woman, the Marchioness Matilda Spina. To relieve the boredom, some of his set got up a pageant at which everyone had to be dressed as a character from history and on horseback. Probably for no better reason than the coincidence of name, the Marchioness chose to be the Marchioness Matilda of Tuscany (11th century). Learning of this, 'Henry' studied the history of the period, and decided to go as Henry IV, who is supposed to have been secretly in love with his political enemy the Marchioness Matilda. Either for political reasons or because she suspected and perhaps even returned his love, Matilda interceded with Pope Gregory on Henry's behalf, and it was at her castle at Canossa in Tuscany that he did his penance and was received back into the church in 1077 (at the age of 21). 'Henry' intended this choice of role to be an obscure declaration of love for Matilda, and may have intended to make a more overt declaration on the day of the pageant. But during the procession a rival admirer of Matilda, Baron Tito Belcredi, riding behind 'Henry', pricked his horse (either as a joke or out of jealousy), causing it to throw its rider. Henry struck his head on a stone and recovered consciousness believing himself to be, in reality, Henry IV in 1077. His family were wealthy enough to secrete him away in a lonely villa in the Umbrian countryside, surrounded by retainers and courtiers trained and costumed to act as the minor figures in his history. At the time of the play, this charade has been kept up for twenty years.

Partly because Henry's sister, who had paid for all this, has died, and partly because 'advances' in psychiatric medicine have caused her son, the Marquis Charles de Nolli, to have hopes of the possibility of a cure, de Nolli decides to take an advanced psychiatrist to see Henry. De Nolli is at the time engaged to Frida, the daughter of the Marchioness Matilda (now a widow) who insists on joining the party out of curiosity, accompanied by her lover Belcredi. Frida, aged nineteen, is a replica of her mother twenty years ago. The play begins just before their arrival at the villa. I hope not to spoil the play for those seeing it for the first time by telling what happens in so many words, though I shall be unable to avoid implying certain things.

In his 1925 introduction to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello wrote of 'the inherent tragic conflict between life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it, immutable)'. Given the death of God, there are only two alternatives to the formless flux, art (where the artist can play god) and history. Yeats tried to exploit both at once in his Byzantium poems, but found, (as Keats had done in the 'Ode to a Grecian Urn') that a terrible price had to be paid for this form and beauty and timelessness, the turning of the heart to a stone, the cold marble of the urn, the stone which in 'Easter 1916' troubles the living stream, the stone on which Henry cracks his head.

Though Henry did not, of course, choose to fall from his horse, his accident simply translates into an extremely pure form, a caricature form, what was already incipient within him, his need to impose form on life. The hero of an early Pirandello novel, Mattia Pascal, had tried to do exactly the opposite, to escape the limitations of all form by staging his own death, changing his name, and embarking on a new life of boundless freedom. Henry is afraid of freedom, with its constant change and challenge, and prefers the ineluctable form of art (the pageant) or history. Both men learn the same lesson: 'that it is not possible to act as living and dead at the same time'.³

In an early essay (1908), Pirandello states that every human life is very like the activity of the writer – 'an attempt to order our consciousness and construct a personality for ourselves':

Each man patches up his mask as best he can – the mask he wears in public, that is, but within each of us is another which often contradicts our external one. Nothing is true. Oh yes, the sea, a mountain, a rock, a blade of grass - these things are true. But man? Always wearing a mask, unwillingly, unwittingly - a mask of what he, in all good faith, believes himself to be: handsome, honourable, elegant, generous, unsuccessful, etc. ... He cannot ever stop posing and attitudinizing over the most trifling events and details – even with himself. And he invents so much and creates so many parts for himself which he needs to believe in and take seriously.

Eric Bentley called his edition of Pirandello's collected plays *Naked Masks*. In Pirandello it is never a choice between the mask and the face, only between more or less false, more or less damaging masks, between masks worn consciously or unconsciously. As Henry says: 'We're every one of us fixed in all good faith in a wonderful conception of ourselves'. Or as Pirandello put it in the 1925 preface:

³ Adriano Tilgher, 'Life versus Form', in *Pirandello*, p.23.

Every creature of fantasy and art, in order to exist, must have his drama, that is, a drama in which he may be a character and for which he is a character. This drama is the character's *raison d'etre*, his vital function, necessary for his existence.

But real life offers no such *raison d'etre*. We are all characters in search of an author. Life is a stage on which each of us acts out a drama with himself as hero. Human life would be formless and meaningless unless the individual can play a part he invents for himself and interpret the actions of others as supporting parts in the same play. Fortunately most people do this quite unconsciously, not realizing that their part is unlikely to be Hamlet, and much more likely to be Rosencrantz or Guildenstern or an attendant lord. Hell is other people because other people attempt to cast you in a subordinate role in their play, to impose on you their arbitrary and distorted image of you. As Henry says:

Don't you think it's a bit much, expecting a man to keep quiet, when he knows that there's a fellow going about doing his damndest to persuade other people that you're what he sees you as? When he's trying his utmost to fix in other people's minds *his* assessment of you ... *his* judgement upon you! 'He's mad!' [227]⁴

To allow others, in Eliot's words, to 'fix you in a formulated phrase', is, in Existentialist terms, to live inauthentically, or in bad faith. A few, of whom Henry is one, rebel against the 'unjust and inexplicable torment' of this absurdity, this alienation. Perhaps 'mad' Henry is the sanest person in the play. His life is fixed, but in a role of his own choosing. He had earlier sought to impose form on life by acting, then by transforming life into a masquerade. His fall completes and fixes that transformation. No longer is he at the mercy of chance and other people. Henry explains the advantages of his 'madness' to his servants:

All the time you'd feel yourself to be living ... really to be living ... in the history of the eleventh century ... here at the Court of your Emperor, Henry IV! And to think that at a distance of eight centuries from this remote age of ours ... so colourful and yet so sepulchral ... to think that the men of the twentieth century are torturing themselves, in a absolute agony of anxiety, to know how things will work out. Painstakingly they rush around, frantic about fate and fortune, and about what they have in store for them. Whereas you are already in history with me! And sad as my lot is ... hideous as are the events of my life ... nonetheless ... it's all history. ... Nothing can possibly change! Everything is fixed for ever! Every event happens precisely and coherently, right down to the last detail. Yes, the pleasures of history ... and they are so very great! [233-4]

Every detail of his life is already completed, documented, immutable. This character has found his author.

Yet to become a historical character is not in itself enough, for history is also in time. Henry IV grew old and died. Henry is not just locked into history, he is locked into a specific moment in 1077, just after Canossa, which is the moment of maximum

⁴ Quotations are from Frederick May's translation in *Luigi Pirandello: Right You Are! (If You think So), All for the Best, and Henry IV*, Penguin, 1962.

uncertainty and mental turmoil for Henry. He does not know whether he has been truly forgiven by Gregory, whether Matilda is his friend or enemy, which of the bishops are loyal, whether his marriage can be revived, whether the princes will rise against him. At the same time, because he is also a twentieth century man who has read the history books, he does know these things. His life has the stability of history, but also the even greater fixity of art which can stand outside time. This is symbolized in the play by two life-sized portraits in Henry's castle. They are portraits of himself and Matilda Spina in their costumes painted just before the pageant; but for Henry in his madness they are himself and Matilda of Tuscany frozen at the moment when she held his fate in her hands. It is therefore not only that Henry is condemned to live another man's life 800 years ago, but also that he is condemned to remain for ever 26, even though that image can be maintained now only with the aid of rouge and hair-dye.

The doctor's plan is to subject Henry to a shock which will jolt him back into 'sanity'. Frida and de Nolli are to dress up as the figures in the paintings, stand in place of the paintings, and come to life as Henry passes them. Frida and her mother are unhappy with the proposal, but cannot articulate their instinctive doubts. Belcredi, however, realizes that Henry is going to be made to leap not twenty but eight hundred years: 'Why, you'll have to pick up the pieces afterwards in a basket!' But even Belcredi does not realize that a leap of a mere twenty years would, in any case, be too much, that Henry would 'arrive hungry as a wolf at a banquet which had long since been cleared away'. The plan is carried out, with what consequences must be seen in a performance of the play.

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