

Study Material on *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello

Paper DSE XII (Modernism and Postmodernism)

Prepared by Sandip Mondal

Associate Professor

Dept. of English

University of Calcutta

Certain points to be noted:

1. This is exclusively for the use of the students of the Department of English (MA Semester IV – 2020)
2. The ideas discussed in A, B, C, & D are the heads of discussion, not topics for answering questions during examination.
3. Copying sentences from this written discussion would be discredited.
4. The discussion attempts to provide students with clues for thinking only. Students have to read and understand the text on their own.

A) Text, Author and Theatre:

- i) The play starts as the rehearsal of a published and printed ‘text’/script written, ironically enough by Luigi Pirandello himself, *Rules of the Game* and ends with a different narrative, which is also a text, of six characters. The narrative in turn becomes another play by Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

- ii) The Father, initially as the spokesman of the troupe of six characters, represents all traditions of theatre that could be performed without written texts. Mummers' Play, Interlude and Commedia dell'arte may be cited as examples
- iii) Preceding point (ii) may be elaborated in terms of Pirandello's attempt to debunk the convention of realistic theatre (European Tradition which includes the writings of Anton Chekov, Henrik Ibsen, Strindberg and so on)
- iv) Preceding point (iii) may be elaborated in terms of
 - a) The rise of printing technology in Europe and its influence on theatre since the publication of Shakespeare's play in Quartos and Folios
 - b) The politics of the rise and development of bourgeois realism from Seventeenth Century onwards and its attempt to confer meaning on human experiences including literature.
- v) For the Producer, in Act One at least, the written script/text is the 'originary' point of meaning. The tradition of realistic tradition is based on this assumption.
- vi) Preceding point (v) may be elaborated in terms of
 - a) How the Producer was playing a subservient role in translating the written code into the language of theatre, proscenium in this case. The significance of acting, body movement, stage setting, props, light has to be elaborated upon, general ideas and specific to *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.
 - b) The relationship between text and author and how, with the influence of German Idealism, Nineteenth Century aesthetic theory puts emphasis on the mind/imagination (secondary) of the author.
 - c) The understanding and application of Barthesian and Foucauldian ideas on authorship, as explored in 'Death of the Author' 'From Work to Text' and 'What is an Author?' may be considered.
- vii) The ideas of text and author are located in a dynamics of fluidity and flux in the play. The students are expected to refer to the events, narrative and the experiences of the Producer, actors and of course six characters in this connection.
- viii) Referring back to vi (b) students may elaborate on Pirandello's departure from this. The text-author liaison is disrupted as six characters act independently. They, as claimed, are abandoned by the author.

- ix) The search of the six characters for an author and their transformation from character to a narrator of their own experiences declare their freedom; the freedom of text and of language. The students are expected to apply the basic assumptions of structuralism and post structuralism here.
- x) Pirandello attempts to place different ideas of theatre in this text-author dialogue as explained in the following points:
 - a) Director as also the ‘creator’ of text.
 - b) How each performance is a new text and therefore different from previous and future ones.
 - c) The ending of the play has to be considered (Only four characters leave the stage)

B) Family, Marriage and Sexuality:

- i) The representation of normativity in terms of family, marriage and sexuality, as manifest in European cultural texts since Seventeenth Century and as informed by middle class/bourgeois sensibility is questioned in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.
- ii) Renaissance onwards theatre (and other forms cultural texts too) in Europe has always tried to place sexuality, when not sanctioned by the institution by marriage, outside the center, mainstream society. Plays, more particularly comedies, represented resolution of crises in ‘happy ending or reconciliation’ code through marriage and family. Sexuality, as a separate human experience is only represented to live, literally and metaphorically in the margin. Brothel, as an important narrative trope and as a space, exists, but only in the margin; outside the city. British Renaissance plays may be considered in this connection (*Measure for Measure*, *Henry IV* plays, *Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Volpone* and so on) The presence of a mistress or an outlawed lover, all being narrative components of the entire lot of City Comedy, discreetly exist in human society, but never recognized.

- iii) Point (i) and (ii) may be elaborated upon with reference to the nature-culture binary as implied by Freud's discussion of 'reality principle' vs 'pleasure principle'
- iv) In *Six Characters in Search of an Author* individual choices, freedom and desire are played against the forces of family and society. On many occasions characters refuse to negotiate the opposites, a negotiation that attributes stability and cohesion to the bourgeois society. Students are expected to elaborate on this by analyzing the events and situations that involve six characters.
- v) Madam Pace's dress shop as a cover up for what it actually is signifies the bourgeois hypocrisy that society encourages.
- vi) Family reunites in Madam Pace's secretly run brothel.
- vii) Society, steeped in bourgeois sensibility, especially when represented in literary/cultural texts attempts to conceal unrecognized sexuality with the aid of a sentimental strain. Stepdaughter's repeated hysteric enactment of her encounter with Father at Madam Pace's place is a critique of that trope of culture.
- viii) The element of Remorse in the Father, that of Revenge in the Stepdaughter and that of Scorn in the Mother (as stated in the beginning of Act One) are primarily caused by the act of incest that they have narrowly escaped.
- ix) The issue of incest has to be elaborated in terms of nature-culture binary. The thesis propounded by Claude Levi Strauss has to be taken into consideration.
- x) The author, who abandoned the six characters, being thoroughly informed by a society of bourgeois sensibility subscribes to the hypocrisy regarding sexuality. He represents a normative society. Six characters, born in the mind/unconscious (as the author consciously avoids bringing them to the world) of the author, attempts to unmask that hypocrisy. Issue of censorship is a case in point. Such a disturbing narrative has to be restricted as it contains the potential for posing threats to the apparent cohesion of society. The Producer shudders when the incestuous encounter is fully enacted.

“**Producer** (*his head in his hands*) For God's sake! What are you saying!”

C) Artefact, Reality and Realism:

- i) Since the play comments on the evolutions of the notions of the dichotomy of life and art, reality and artefact students must have an overview of the critical and theoretical development of this topic as listed below. Once understood, they are expected to apply them to the narrative of the play. In the following points I will only consider the Nineteenth Century and the Twentieth Century critical discourse functioned as the context of Pirandello's writings. However, classical (Greek here) I have included as it is the foundation of any later development. But students are welcome to incorporate thoughts and ideas of other schools and developments.
 - a) Aristotle's idea of mimesis which is all about the recreation of a 'better' reality – mimesis as a creative art – art as permanent and universal (as opposed to life and reality) – Aristotle's deviation from Plato in this connection.

“**Father** ... Nature uses human imagination to lift her work of creation to even higher levels.” (Act 1)
 - b) Wordsworth (Preface to Lyrical Ballads)-Coleridge (Biographia Literaria) debate in relation to poetry and reality – primary imagination vs secondary imagination.
 - c) Pirandello's implicit critique of the propositions of the Art for Art's Sake movement which itself was a critique of the Victorian tendency of attaching art with morality. Students must familiarize themselves with the basic ideas of Théophile Gautier, Edgar Allan Poe and Oscar Wilde.
- ii) Stage-space as an alternative reality.
- iii) Stage, primarily as a mode of entertainment, is a respite from reality, but at the same time it refers back to and is symptomatic of reality.
- iv) Theatre is not a hermeneutically sealed world, it rather points to its symbiotic relationship with the world of reality

- v) Point i, ii, iii & iv have to be elaborated by students with a thorough analysis of the Father-Producer debate with which the play starts.
- vi) The Producer's approach towards life and narrative (art) is informed by realism by which he tries to confer the continuity of time and space to the narrative of the six characters presented in fragments.
- vii) The Father's approach is Modernist in nature and poses an antithesis to that of the producer.
- viii) Considering reality and the narrative of reality as a stable phenomenon is a chief marker of realism. Narrative in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* does not present a stable narrative. Students must consider the ending of the play and think of this fluid and ever-changing aspect of reality in terms of Louis Althusser's ideas.
- ix) In the European tradition, Nineteenth Century realistic theatre is coterminous with modern proscenium theatre with 'real' décor. Producer's elaborate arrangement of stage setting, back curtain and light is contrasted by the bare minimum of the six characters.
- x) Pirandello in this play attempts to critique both the realism; the larger bourgeois realism, as discussed earlier, and the theatrical realism which in Italy is better known as 'verismo' which often interacts with naturalism. Pirandello, along with exposing bourgeois pretension, also points to the failure of realistic theatre in (re)presenting reality.

D) Illusion and Reality:

- i) The six characters' refuge in the stage space may be analyzed from the following perspective:
 - a) They have shifted from author's mind to the space of art forms (theatre in this case). This proposition leads to two contradictory assumptions.
 - I. If the author's (who abandoned the six characters) mind is another space of artefact then the characters are perpetually locked in a world of artifact and their journey is circular.

- II. If we consider the author's mind as an element of reality and the space of theatre as a world of artefact then the six characters emulate the freedom of art form, illusion more convincing than reality.
- ii) The importance of light in the entire tradition of the Nineteenth Century and Twentieth Century realistic and proscenium theatre – the connotation of light – the power of light in changing the reality of the stage space. Students are expected to identify and analyze such situations in the play.
 - iii) The six characters, as opposed to the actors, are efficient performers. With their narrative, more convincing enactment of that and ability to dance (the Stepdaughter) create a hypnotic spell which is suggestive of the illusion of theatre at large.
 - iv) The interchangeability of actors and characters – temporary suspension of the 'being'/personality of actors – Stanislavsky's Method Acting.
 - v) The debate between the Producer and the Father:
 - a) The producer thinks that what he is doing on stage is real and the intrusion of the six characters is a temporary illusion.
 - b) The Father thinks that the Producer, being symptomatic of the discourse of theatre (realistic tradition), is so steeped in the idea of presenting illusion as reality that he has lost the faculty of recognizing reality.
 - c) The preceding point (b) almost claims that realistic theatre fails to present reality on stage.

Father (*hurt but answering gently*) You know very well, as a man of theatre, that life is full of all sorts of odd thing which have no need at all to pretend to be real because they are actually true.

Producer What the devil are you talking about?

Father What I'm saying is that you really must be mad to do thing the opposite way round: to create situations that obviously aren't true and try to make them seem to be really happening. But then I suppose that sort of madness is the only reason for your profession. (Act I)

- vi) The issue of meta-theatre has to be understood keeping in mind the narrative components and structure of familiar plays like *Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet* and

Midsummer's Night's Dream. The issue should also be thought of in terms of the following points:

- a) The audience's involvement with the narrative of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and any other play that deploys the element of meta-theatre. One should consider different stages of experience
 - I. The audience enters the auditorium apparently suspending the reality of the world outside and immerse themselves into the illusion of theatre.
 - II. That illusion becomes reality once they start 'watching' the play.
 - III. Once the next layer of the 'inner' narrative (meta-theatre) starts the audience experiences a jerk; a shift to experience the 'reality' of the narrative.
 - IV. As the meta-theatre unfolds, the characters on stage, earlier engaged in the 'outer' layer of narrative, assume the role of the audience.
 - V. If the journey of the audience, in understanding the narrative of the meta-theatre, is centrifugal till the climax of the play, the audience must indulge in another centripetal journey from climax to end.
- vii) The significance of the appearance of Madam Pace:
 - a) The temporal and spatial continuity of the narrative is disturbed as offering 'disturbance' is one key element in Pirandello
 - b) The narrative of the six characters becomes more convincing as Madam Pace hails from 'reality'.
 - c) She appears as a witness of the experience of the six characters and attributes the aspect of veracity to their narrative
 - d) She leaves the stage suddenly only to suggest her engagement with the 'reality', the dress-shop in this case.

List of references:

- Barthes, Roland. *Image-Music-Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. Great Britain: Fontana, 1977. Print.
- Bentley, Eric (Ed.) *The Theory of the Modern Stage*. New York. Penguin Books. 1992. Print.
- Caughie, John, ed. *Theories of Authorship: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Cheney, Sheldon. *The Theatre: Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting and Stagecraft*. London: Vision Press Ltd, 1969. Print.
- Durant, Will. *The Story of Philosophy*. New York. Pocket Book. 2006. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Delhi: Maya Blackwell, 2000. Print.
- Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Hawkes, Terence. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. Abington: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Leitch, Vincent B., ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 2001. Print.
- Lodge, David, and Nigel Wood, eds. *Modern Criticism and Theory*. Delhi: Pearson Education, 2003. Print.
- May, Robin. *History of the Theatre*. New York. The Hamlyn Publishing Ltd. 2002. Print.
- Moretti, Franco. *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*. London: Verso. 2014. Print.
- Nellhaus, Tobin. *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism*. New York: Paqlgrave MacMillan. 2010. Print.

Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. Print.

Sidiropoulou, Avra. *Authoring Performance: The Director in Contemporary Theatre*. New York: Paqgrave MacMillan. 2011. Print.