Six Characters in Search of an Author

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LUIGI PIRANDELLO

Born to a wealthy and politically active merchant family near the Sicilian city of Girgenti (now called Agrigento), Luigi Pirandello quickly rejected the idea of following in his father's footsteps and, inspired by the ghost stories told to him by one of the servants who worked in his house, began writing fiction at a young age. After moving with his family to the Sicilian capital of Palermo at age 13, he turned to poetry. He definitively turned down the opportunity to join his father's business a few years later, choosing instead to study Philology at the Universities of Palermo, Rome, and Bonn (Germany), where he finished his degree in 1891 with a dissertation on his hometown's Sicilian dialect. At his family's behest, in 1894 he married Maria Antonietta Portulano, the daughter of another family of Agrigento sulfur merchants. He returned to Rome, where he taught Italian and began writing and publishing fiction, including a number of novellas and his first play. In 1903, his and his wife's families suffered a financial disaster when an important sulfur mine flooded. Pirandello began teaching more lessons to compensate, but the catastrophe's most significant legacy was the mental collapse it precipitated in Pirandello's wife Antoinetta, who never fully recovered and became increasingly violent and jealous over the following decade. During this period, however, Pirandello first tasted fame with the publication of his novel *The Late Mattia Pascal* and his essay *L'Umorismo*, published in English as *On Humor*. He published a number of important stories, novellas, and especially plays in the 1910s, including *Right You Are (if you think so)* and *The Rules of the Game*. Antoinetta's mental illness, likely in part exacerbated by Pirandello's numerous affairs, is a recurring influence on Pirandello's work during this period; in 1919, she went to a mental asylum that she would ultimately never leave. The public's reaction to the controversial *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and the success of Pirandello's *Henry IV* launched the author to international renown. He briefly affiliated with the ruling Fascist Party during the 1920s, which got him a position at the helm of the Teatro d'Arte di Roma, but then publicly rejected the Fascists in 1927, and then seemed to waffle back and forth for the rest of his life. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934 "for his bold and ingenious revival of dramatic and scenic art," and he died two years later in Rome.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the events of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* conspicuously lack any specific setting in terms of place or time, Pirandello deliberately alludes to important trends in the history of Italian theater. His most prominent reference is to the influential, longstanding tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, in which masked actors playing archetypal characters improvised scenes based on rough outlines—indeed, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Manager tries to turn the Characters' drama into a play of his own, and in the second version of his play, Pirandello suggested the Characters wear masks referencing their dominant emotions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Luigi Pirandello remains best remembered for his plays, including *Right You Are (if you think so)* (1917), about two people who both insist a third person is their relative and believe the other person to be insane, and *Henry IV* (1921), about a mad aristocrat who is convinced that he is the titular emperor. However, Pirandello did not focus primarily on drama until his 50s, and the majority of his prolific output consisted of novels and (many hundreds of) short stories. These stories are collected in fifteen Italian volumes, each of which covers a year from 1922-1937. However, only some of these have been translated into English—a collection has been published as *Tales of Madness* (2014). Of Pirandello's six novels, the most significant are *The Late Mattia Pascal* (1904), *The Old and the Young* (1916), and *One, None and a Hundred Thousand* (1926). He expressed his artistic philosophy in letters and essays, most prominently the early *On Humor* (L'Umorismo, 1908), and also wrote extensive collections of poetry, especially in his youth, much of which was translated and published in the dual-language edition *Selected Poems* (2016). Pirandello's works have also been adapted into dozens of films. Other prominent Italian modernist writers include Italo Svevo, who remains best known for the psychological novel *Zeno's Conscience* (1923), and the equally prolific Sardinian novelist and fellow Nobel Prize winner Grazia Deledda. Deladda and Pirandello's relationship was controversial, particularly because Pirandello wrote a novel, *Her Husband* (1911), parodying her life and marriage. Deledda's most important works include *The Flower of Sardinia* (1892), *After the Divorce* (1902) and *Reeds in the Wind* (1913). Finally, Pirandello's work, particularly *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, is widely seen as anticipating the post-World War II Theater of the Absurd, an extensive genre whose most prominent practitioners included Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard, and Edward Albee. Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950) and *The Chairs* (1952), Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and *Happy Days* (1961), and Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1958), *The American Dream* (1961), and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

(1962) exemplify the genre's existential and psychological focus.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Six Characters in Search of an Author: A Comedy in the Making
- **When Written:** 1921
- **Where Written:** Rome, Italy
- **When Published:** May 10, 1921 (first performance)
- **Literary Period:** Italian Modernism
- **Genre:** Play, Theater of the Absurd, Metatheater, Tragedy
- **Setting:** A theater, the family garden
- **Climax:** At the very end of the play, the Child drowns, the Boy commits suicide, and (in some versions) the Step-Daughter runs out of the theater, fulfilling their predictions and leaving the Actors and the Manager baffled.
- **Antagonist:** The author, the Actors, the Manager, Madame Pace, the Characters' own drama (or fate)
- **Point of View:** Dramatic point of view

EXTRA CREDIT

Reaction, Revision, and Preface. After the first performance of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in Rome, the baffled audience responded by jeering the actors and playwright, shouting insults including "Madhouse" (which is notable as commentary on the play, during which the Father and the Manager debate whether theater or reality is really "madness"). Pirandello snuck out of the theater to avoid the angry audience and riots broke out in the streets. In order to clarify his ideas, Pirandello revised the play and wrote a lengthy, now-famous Preface to it in 1925. In his revised version, he suggested the six Characters wear masks representing their essential emotions.

PLOT SUMMARY

Six Characters in Search of an Author begins by defying the conventions of theater: when the audience enters, the curtain is raised and the stage is "as it usually is during the day time." Some of the actors, who themselves play theater Actors, hang out on stage like they might have during their rehearsals. The Manager walks onstage and declares it is in fact time for a rehearsal—they will be working through the Second Act of a Luigi Pirandello play, *Mixing it Up*. (This play is fictional, but in the original text, the Actors rehearse the real Pirandello play *The Rules of the Game*.) The Leading Man objects to the "ridiculous" chef's hat he is asked to wear, and the Manager declares that the play-within-a-play will turn out to be a "glorious failure."

The Door-Keeper interrupts the rehearsal to announce that there are visitors, and a "tenuous light" announces the "fantastic reality" of the six Characters who enter the stage: the capricious middle-aged Father, the veiled and mourning Mother, the audacious and seductive teenaged Step-Daughter, the distant and surly 22-year-old Son, and a younger son and daughter who refuse to speak, the fourteen-year-old "half-frightened" Boy and the timid four-year-old Child. The Father announces that they "have come here in search of an author" and offers the confused Manager to "bring you a drama, sir." They argue about whether the Characters are mad, or the theater itself is madness—the Father insists that he and his family were simply born Characters, but their author never put them to use by putting them in a work of art. The Characters "carry in us a drama" that they cannot wait to play out—as though to prove the point, the Step-Daughter abruptly begins acting out. She announces that she has recently been orphaned and shares a "passion" with the Father, before inexplicably singing and dancing a French song and predicting that the Mother will lose the Child, the Boy will do "the stupidest things," and she herself will run away. Because the Son is the Mother and Father's only legitimate child, she explains, he hates the rest of the family. In shock, the Mother faints, and when she comes to, she begins raving about the Father's "loathsome" plan.

The Father reveals that the Mother's previous lover—the Clerk he used to employ and the real father of the Step-Daughter, the Boy, and the Child—recently died, which is why the Mother and Daughter are dressed as though in mourning. He admits that he sent the Mother to live with the Clerk because she is "deaf, deaf, mentally deaf!" He kept and raised the Son, but eventually regained interest in his old family and began to visit them—giving the Step-Daughter gifts at school, for instance—until the Mother, Clerk, and their children moved away for good. The Clerk died two months ago, and to make ends meet, the Mother and Step-Daughter began working at the atelier of a woman named Madame Pace: the Mother sewed dresses, but the Step-Daughter worked as a prostitute. One fateful day, the Father visited the establishment—and the Step-Daughter. They disagree about whether he knew who she was, and whether the Mother managed to pre-empt their liaison or narrowly missed it. The Father explains that he took the family back in and has allowed them to live with him since, but they continue to fight endlessly. Everyone begins to bicker with the Son, who refuses to divulge his feelings and insists he is "an 'unrealized' character, dramatically speaking." The Manager agrees that the Characters have the material for a drama and offers to put them in touch with an author who can write their story. But the Characters insist the Manager must be the author: he shall watch them act out their drama and "take it down [...] scene by scene!" The Manager agrees, and he and the Characters go into his office for 20 minutes, leaving the Actors confused onstage and providing an intermission before

Act Two.

A bell rings to mark the beginning of Act Two, and the Step-Daughter, Child, and Boy come onstage. The Step-Daughter tells the Child, her young sister, that the play is "a horrid comedy," make-believe for everyone else but real for the little girl. She begins ranting about a **fountain** and then starts berating the boy, who mysteriously has a **revolver** in his pocket. The Father and Manager call her inside and she switches places with the Son and Mother, who debate which of them ends up suffering worse in the end. The Son bemoans the Father's confidence that "he has got the meaning of it all" and insistence on publicly revealing the Characters' private drama—their failure to truly be a family. Everyone comes out and starts debating the stage decorations, which the Step-Daughter wants to be exact replicas of Madame Pace's shop. The Manager tells the Prompter to take down the Characters' actions in shorthand and the Actors to watch the Characters so that they can play them later. The Father protests that the Characters should play themselves, since they are more real than the Actors, but the Manager insists that the Characters cannot act, and should leave it to the professionals. The Father and Step-Daughter laugh at the Actors the Manager assigns to play them, noting that the Actors do not resemble them, and then note that they have a problem: Madame Pace is not present. The Father begins "arranging the stage for her" by hanging up the Actresses' hats and mantles, and suddenly Madame Pace herself appears in the theater and walks on stage.

The Father challenges the confused Actors and Managers, saying they have a limited conception of truth, while the Step-Daughter and Madame Pace begin the scene, whispering inaudibly in the corner—they refuse to speak up until the Father leaves, which he does against the Manager's protests. Madame Pace then begins telling the Step-Daughter about her coming client, but everyone breaks out in laughter: the foreign Pace speaks a comical, broken dialect of "half English, half Italian." Again commenting simultaneously on the play itself and the play-within-a-play, the Manager declares that Pace's speech will "put a little comic relief into the crudity of the situation." Pace tells the Step-Daughter that an "old signore" is coming to meet her, and the Mother suddenly jumps at her, yelling, "murderess!" The Actors restrain her, and Madame Pace exits: it is now time for the Father to enter. He approaches the coy Step-Daughter, who explains that she is "in mourning."

The Manager stops the Characters and orders the Actors to begin re-enacting the scene. The Father and Step-Daughter laugh as the Leading Lady and Leading Man fumble through their parts, and the Step-Daughter interrupts to correct what really happened—but the Manager refuses to put her and the Father's implied sexual encounter in his version: in the theater, he insists, "truth up to a certain point, but no further." The Step-Daughter protests that this means helping the Father camouflage his sins and insists that—with the Mother out of the room—she and the Father show what actually happened. The Mother breaks down and protests, insisting that "it's taking place now" and that the two mute, younger children "cling to me to keep my torment actual and vivid." The Manager declares this moment "the nucleus of the whole first act" and the Step-Daughter recounts sleeping with the Father and feeling ashamed of herself, before beginning to act it out on the stage. The Mother intervenes and the Manager, satisfied, mutters, "curtain here, curtain," meaning that he plans to end the First Act of his play here—but the Machinist misinterprets him and actually lowers the curtain.

The final act begins with a slightly changed set that resembles a garden. The Characters sit on one side of the stage, opposite the Actors, with the Manager standing in the middle and declaring it is time to plan out the Second Act of their play. He and the Step-Daughter argue about whether they can show the events of the Characters' life happening separately in their true settings, but he insists on combining them and staging them all in the garden. Then, the Manager and Father argue again about Characters and Actors, whether the theater is real or just a game, and ultimately about whether the Manager is a person at all—the Characters, the Father argues, are eternal and unchanging, whereas normal people change every day and constantly look at their past selves like "a mere illusion." The Manager asks the Father to stop philosophizing and tells him it is truly ridiculous for him to think he is a Character created by an author, but the Father insists that he is not philosophizing, but merely "crying aloud the reason of my sufferings," and that he and his family truly were "born of an author's fantasy" and then "denied life by him." The Manager can "give them their stage life," and the Step-Daughter warns him against "abandon[ing]" the Characters like their author did. (The Father suggests that the Manager can "modify" some of the Characters rather than abandon them.)

Ultimately, the Characters and Manager agree that the last scene will take place in the garden—for which the stage is already set. The Manager starts coaching the Boy on how to act, and the Son tries to leave, but the Step-Daughter stops him because "he is obliged to stay here, indissolubly bound to the chain." He refuses to act out a scene with the desperate Mother, who insists that this scene did take place. The other Characters force to threaten the Son to act, but he accuses the Father of trying to take their author's place and even changing the story for his own convenience. The Manager asks the Son what really did happen, and the Son reluctantly begins narrating the "horrible" events—the Manager looks over and sees the Child drowned in the fountain, and the Son mentions the Boy's "eyes like a madman's." Suddenly, the revolver goes off behind some trees, and the Actors drag out the Boy's body. Shocked, they cannot decide if he is really dead or if "it's only make believe." The Father insists it is reality and the Manager

exclaims, "to hell with it all!" as the curtain falls.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Manager – The hotheaded and authoritarian director of the theater company that rehearses a Pirandello play until the arrival of the six Characters. During this brief initial scene, the Manager foreshadows the rest of the play, insisting that "the author plays the fool with us all" in Pirandello's "ridiculous" work, which will turn out to be a "glorious failure." When the Characters arrive, they demand the Manager be their author. Defending conventional ideas about the difference between reality and fiction, the Manager calls the Characters "mad people" and initially rejects their proposal, until they convince him to direct their drama at the end of Act One. During Act Two, the Manager becomes the audience as the Characters play out their drama for him. "On the stage," the Manager argues, the Characters "cannot exist" and must instead be played by his Actors. He insists on all these rules to preserve "the conventions of the theatre," an art form that requires "truth up to a certain point, but no further." Throughout Act Three, while the Father repeatedly questions whether the Manager is more real than the Characters, the Manager simply rejects his philosophical arguments as "nonsense" that "none of us believes." Beyond parroting a conventional theory about the relationship between the stage and the real world, the Manager also embodies traditional concepts of authorship and control: he yells at and manipulates his Actors and stage crew, who effectively have no personalities of their own, and insists the Characters do everything his way, even as they resist his directions and volunteer their own analyses and explanations. Through the Manager's hilarious failures, Pirandello critiques these conventional perspectives and reveals authors and directors as only partially in control of their own works and productions.

The Father – An overweight, balding, middle-aged man whose "alternatively mellifluous and violent" passions drive the family drama that the Characters present to the Manager and his acting company, their decision to bring it to the theater in the first place, and the philosophical debates that run throughout the play. A self-declared creative intellectual, the Father blames "the complicated torments of [his] spirit" for the family's downfall and believes that his quest to live according to his principles and ideals has proven self-defeating. Early in his marriage, recognizing that the Mother does not share his temperament, he decides to send her away to live his Clerk, with whom she is clearly better-matched. Over the years, the Father begins to miss his family and starts trying to participate in their lives from afar—most notably by visiting the Step-Daughter at school. Years later, after losing contact with them for decades, the Father reunites with the Step-Daughter when he solicits her services at Madame Pace's brothel. While he insists he was unaware of her identity, the Step-Daughter challenges this claim, and she and the other Characters accuse him of plotting with the Manager to act out a version of events that makes him seem less guilty than he was in reality. He tries to repent for his error by inviting the Mother and her three children to move back in with him, but this leads to the interpersonal tensions that ultimately precipitate the Child and Boy's deaths at the end of the play. Throughout the play, the Father insists that he and his fellow Characters are more real than the Manager and Actors because Characters are immortal and unchanging, whereas normal people constantly transform into new versions of themselves, leaving their old selves behind. Yet this also condemns the attempts to undo the damage he has caused. He philosophizes in an attempt to rationalize his failures, explain the "reason of my sufferings," and therefore create meaning out of his meaningless life, but this inevitably fails—as the Manager and other Characters repeatedly remind him. As a quintessentially impotent intellectual fighting the absurdity of the human condition and a fictional Character insisting that his existence is just as valid as his audience's, the Father illustrates the limits of human reason and the folly of trying to use that reason to draw a sharp line between reality and "illusion."

The Step-Daughter – Domineering, emotionally unstable, and larger-than-life, reputedly the child of the Mother and the Clerk, the roughly 18-year-old Step-Daughter helps precipitate the disintegration of the Characters' family when she has a sexual encounter with the Father while working as a prostitute at Madame Pace's atelier. She implores the Manager to stage the Characters' drama in order to enact revenge on her family and contests the Father's narrative of events throughout, suggesting he was more brutal than he admits, that he knew her identity when he visited her at the brothel, or that he may even be her real father. Nevertheless, she also suggests she may still have feelings for him and remains brutally antagonistic toward her apparent step-brother, the Son, and her brother, the Boy, whom she also partially blames for the family's fate. In contrast, she treats the Child with excessive adoration, raising questions about whether the girl is really her sister (or might actually be her daughter). Like the Father, she cringes when the Actors try to perform the Characters' story and tries to take control over the production from the Manager—specifically, by insisting that the scenes are set exactly as they were in reality. The Step-Daughter is at once a victim and an opportunist hoping to use the theater to air her grievances and win public acclaim. In contrast to the Father's philosophical monologues, the Son's internalized shame, and the Mother's private suffering, the Step-Daughter's coping mechanism of performance exemplifies both the power of storytelling and the perverse voyeurism of the theater.

The Mother – "Crushed and terrified" by the disintegration of

her family, the Mother (whose real name is Amalia) is veiled and dressed in black throughout the play. She seldom speaks or looks up, and spends most of her time onstage either frozen in place or suffering emotional outbursts related to her children's suffering. She even declares she does not "know how to talk," and the Father calls her "deaf, deaf, mentally deaf!" Through seemingly no fault of her own, the Mother sees and must endure the death of her husband (the Clerk), the conversion of her daughter (the Step-Daughter) into a prostitute at the hands of Madame Pace, the Father's visit to the Step-Daughter as a client, rejection by her Son, the deaths of her younger children (the Child and Boy), and the reenactment of all these traumatic events on the stage. Like the Son but unlike the Step-Daughter and Father, the Mother never narrates her own version of events, and her agony suggests that the reality of the family's story—from the arc of her relationship to the Father to the question of who is whose child and who is responsible for whose death—might be even more devastating than the Father's version of the narrative suggests. Suffering meaninglessly and with no end in sight, the Mother exemplifies nature according to Pirandello, while the Father embodies the mind.

The Son – The oldest of the four children, and the only actual offspring of the Mother and the Father, who declares himself to be "an 'unrealized' character, dramatically speaking" and fulfills his prediction, avoiding everyone else and refusing to speak or act for the majority of the play. It initially appears that he disdains his Mother for abandoning him during his childhood to go live with the Clerk, and his three stepsiblings for abruptly moving into his household and demanding to be treated as his equals. Meanwhile, the rest of the family thinks the Son looks down on them as "vulgar folk" because of his county upbringing and elite education. While both of these are true to an extent, at the end of the play, the real motive behind the Son's avoidant behavior becomes clear: the Son is the one to find the Child's body in the fountain and see the Boy shoot himself, and he wants neither to reenact nor to publicly acknowledge these "horrible" events on stage. Despite his crucial role in the closing scene, however, the Son fulfills his promise to remain "unrealized." The Father and the Step-Daughter suggest that his coldness might have contributed to the Child and Boy's deaths, and he refuses to act out a scene with his Mother that supposedly takes place immediately before this grim climax. The Son's coping strategy contrasts sharply with those of the Father, who philosophizes and seeks forgiveness publicly, the Mother, who suffers silently and dutifully obeys orders, and the Step-Daughter, who acts out dramatically to try and take revenge on the other Characters. The Son reminds the audience that works of fiction often require hiding characters' feelings, thoughts, and true selves for their dramatic effect. More importantly, his behavior points to the perversity of turning private drama into a public spectacle, as Pirandello does by gesturing to his own family's disintegration through his writing, and suggests that sometimes authors are right to leave their creations unfinished—even if their characters fight back. Indeed, the Son believes he is "stand[ing] in for the will of our author" by refusing to act.

The Boy – The fourteen-year-old apparent son of the Mother and the Clerk, who is "timid [and] half-frightened" throughout the play and, like his sister the Child, never talks. The Step-Daughter continually berates the Boy, calling him a "fool," asking why he does not speak, and predicting his death. At the end of the play, it becomes clear that he will play an important part in an important scene, as the Manager coaches him on how to act and bickers with the Father and Step-Daughter about where to stage the action. Astonishingly, in the play's closing moments, the Boy stands "with eyes like a madman" next to the fountain where his sister, the Child, has drowned—possibly at the Boy's hand, and possibly as a fateful reaction to the family's turmoil after the Father met the Step-Daughter at Madame Pace's brothel. The Boy immediately goes behind the set's trees and shoots himself dead with the **revolver**, and the **curtain** falls with the Actors, Manager, and audience unclear whether this is was part of the Actors' "real" universe, or only the story told by the Characters.

The Child – A young, four-year old girl named Rosetta, who is supposedly the daughter of the Mother and the Clerk (but could just as easily be the Step-Daughter and Father's daughter), and who moves into the Father's house with the rest of the family two months before the Characters show up in the Manager's theater. Dressed in white and beloved by the Step-Daughter, the Child never speaks throughout the entire play. Instead, alongside the Boy, her brother, she acts as a passive observer and "cling[s] to [the Mother] to keep [her] torment actual and vivid." The Step-Daughter and Father predict that the Child and Boy will soon die, which they both do: the Child drowns in the fountain, possibly at the hands of the Boy, who shoots himself with **the revolver**.

The Clerk – The Step-Daughter's father and the Mother's ex-lover, who met her while employed in the family's house decades ago. Learning of his budding relationship with the Mother, the Father fires the Clerk, but this leaves the Mother "like an animal without a master." Out of pity, spite, disgust, or perhaps some combination of these, the Father sends the Mother away and allows her to live with the Clerk, which she does for many years, raising the Step-Daughter in the process. However, two months before the events of the play, the Clerk dies, leaving his family penniless, and the Mother and Step-Daughter begin working at Madame Pace's atelier (as a dressmaker and prostitute, respectively) to make ends meet. Although he is central to the Characters' family drama, the Clerk never appears in the play.

Madame Pace – The owner of an atelier—which is ostensibly a fashion house but truly a brothel—who employs the Mother as a dressmaker and the Step-Daughter as a prostitute after the

Clerk's death. In fact, she gives the Mother work as a ploy to get to the Step-Daughter, and as a result the Mother despises her, because it was at her atelier that the Father and Step-Daughter reunited, when he sought her sexual services, possibly in full awareness of her identity. In the second act, the Father hangs up hats and mantles, "the very articles of her trade," and the "fat, oldish" Pace suddenly appears in the room, strutting to the stage with a "comical elegance" and blurring the lines between the supposedly realistic action of the play and space of the theater, on the one hand, and the world of authorial fantasy, on the other. Pace speaks in broken, half-Italian English (half-Spanish Italian in the original), which the Actors and Characters self-consciously admit offers comic relief—at once in the play they are planning to stage and the play as the audience experiences it. Nevertheless, this comic dimension of her persona contrasts sharply with her line of work and its horrifying effects on the family.

The Leading Man – Alongside the Leading Lady, the main actor in the the Manager's production of the fictional Pirandello play "Mixing It Up." He rehearses his role as the "ridiculous" chef Leo Gala until the six Characters show up, asking to be made into a drama. Proud of his role at the head of the theater company, he insists on playing the Father, even though the Father believes the Leading Man does not at all resemble him. He and the Leading Lady grow furious whenever the Characters declare that their acting does not capture the reality of their story.

The Leading Lady – Besides the Leading Man, the other principal actor in the Manager's production of the fictional Pirandello play "Mixing It Up." When the Characters arrive, the Manager decides to have the Leading Lady play the Step-Daughter. She is moody toward the Leading Man, to whom she is clearly attracted, and bitter towards the Step-Daughter, who both flirts with the Leading Man and insists that the Leading Lady does not accurately portray her true Character. Considering herself and her companions "serious actors" who can be better Characters than the Characters themselves, the Leading Lady is offended whenever the Father criticizes acting as "madness" or "a kind of game."

The Prompter – A stage crewman responsible for reading out stage directions during rehearsals and "prompting" the rehearsing actors with their lines when they forget. After the Manager agrees to turn the Characters' story into a drama, he asks the Prompter to note down in shorthand the events that the Characters act out, in order to create the outline of what will eventually become the script.

The Machinist – One of the stage crew, who (as his name suggests) is responsible for the mechanical aspects of the scenery. The Manager sends him out for "floral decorations," and he later mistakenly lowers **the stage curtain** when the Manager triumphantly declares "curtain" at the point in the action where he plans to end the First Act of his play. (This moment in turn ends the Second Act of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.)

The Scene-Shifters – They never appear on stage, but Pirandello includes them with the list of characters at the beginning of the play, even though this would almost never be done in an ordinary work of theater. By pointing out the existence of behind-the-scenes crew, Pirandello further blurs the boundaries between theater and reality.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Property Man – A stage crewman whom the Manager repeatedly orders to fetch things for the set.

The Door-Keeper – A theater staffer who reports the Characters' arrival and leads them inside the theater at the beginning of the play.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

REALITY, ILLUSION, AND IDENTITY

Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* breaks down the ordinarily straightforward boundaries between fantasy and reality, art and life, and others and the self. His Characters know they are characters and ask what this means for themselves—even though doing so requires violating the fundamental rules of the play's fictional universe. The lead Character, the Father, even declares that the Characters are more real than the Actors, which sets off a protracted debate about what is real, what is illusory, and whether people are themselves at all. Through the Characters' confrontation with the Actors as well as the form of the play itself, Pirandello shows what happens when fantasy and reality collide and suggests they are not so different to begin with. The notions that the world people inhabit is "really real" and that people have fixed identities, Pirandello suggests, are simply subjective and psychologically colored interpretations of a much more complex, but ultimately unknowable, reality.

The central conflict between the Actors and the Characters is over which of them is "real." The very formulation of this conflict inverts the usual relationship between reality and fantasy: both sides are trying to prove their *reality* in order to win the right to *act out a fantasy*. Indeed, the appearance of living, breathing characters challenges this binary from the start. The Father makes a succinct case for why he is more "real" than the Actors or Manager: whereas people change

every day, characters are eternal and unchanging. As Pirandello puts it in his 1925 Preface to the play, one can read the same scene from literature 100,000 times and the characters will always do the same thing. So for the Characters, people are changing and mortal, while fictional characters are fixed and immortal. Indeed, the Father and Manager are in a sense playing out the ancient philosophical debate about whether ideas or material objects are the true "reality."

Pirandello also uses the theater itself to challenge the apparent division between fantasy and reality. Echoing the audience's likely reaction to the play, the Actors and Manager point out that they know intuitively that they live in the real world, and the Characters in a fictional one. But the Father argues that the very purpose of the theater is to bring fantasy to life, to challenge people's concepts of reality. The Characters do this not only by showing up on the same plane of reality as the Actors, but also by repeatedly breaking the Fourth Wall: the Father and Step-Daughter give away the ending of the play and the Son calls himself "an 'unrealized' character, dramatically speaking," analyzing his own role. The Actors, Characters, and stage crew also frequently shift roles, helping show that there are no clear boundaries between the story, the performance, and the real lives of everyone involved (including the audience). For instance, when the Characters begin their drama, the Leading Lady remarks, "we are the audience this time," and the Prompter switches from giving the Actors their lines to copying down the Characters' drama. The different plays-within-the-play also collapse into each other, making it impossible to tell what is "truth" and what is "fiction" by the end of the play. At one point, the Manager declares "**curtain**" to mark where he would end the First Act of his future play, but the Machinist misinterprets him and actually drops the curtain. And, at the very end of the play, the Child drowns in the fountain and the Boy shoots himself. No one can tell if this is the action of the play-within-the-play or the play itself, and the curtain falls as the Manager voices his confusion, leaving the audience even more deeply confused than the people they are watching on stage.

Ultimately, for Pirandello, there is no singular reality that can be transposed against a fixed realm of fantasy. Rather, through the Father, he argues that these concepts are relative and interrelated, based on individuals' various interpretations of their experience and the world. The Father argues that everyone has a different picture of the world and only falsely believe they are understanding one another when they communicate through language. The Characters' conflicting stories about what really happened among them and repeated insistence that the others are lying exemplify this vision of miscommunication, preventing the audience from ever learning if the story they see is the family's "true" drama. The Father also argues that individuals are comprised of different conflicting personalities and asks not to be judged exclusively by his worst "self." The play also repeatedly shows how people's multiplicity gets in the way of recognizing their identities—the Father (presumably) does not recognize the Step-Daughter in Madame Pace's brothel, and neither recognizes the Actors as embodying themselves. In the end, Pirandello does not make a claim about what is "really real" and what is mere illusion—rather, he aims to simply show that reality itself is an illusion, a framework imposed by individual minds on a world that does not neatly divide itself into real and unreal.

Given the play's declaration that theater is "worthy of madmen" and Pirandello's brazen indifference to theatrical norms, it is no surprise that the first production of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* raised a scandal and caused riots in the streets. By shining a light on the long periods of backstage trial and error that precede the polished performances actors finally put on for the public, Pirandello provocatively reveals his own profession as an elaborate magic trick. The Father's lengthy philosophical monologues boldly and directly make this argument from another direction: "real" people, in the theater most of all, must stop insisting that theirs is the only reality. Indeed, through their outrage, Pirandello's audience heeded this call, helping further blur the line between art and life: they shouted "Madhouse!" after the Manager and Father's argument about which of their existences is "Madness," and declared the play precisely what the Manager predicts at its beginning: a "glorious failure."

AUTHORSHIP AND MEANING

In his Preface to the 1925 version of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Luigi Pirandello revealed that the six Characters at the heart of the play were his own creations, and that *he* was the author who abandoned them more than a decade earlier after failing to place them in an adequate story. But they took on a life of their own and began to haunt him while he worked on other projects. This process showed him that his creations were not entirely his own: rather, his characters became independent beings that lived in his imagination and gradually forced him to write out their "drama." The drama he creates is, in fact, the story of this whole process, played out on stage. As the Characters seek their author and struggle for control (authorship) of the narrative they are piecing together with the Actors and Manager, the audience or reader learns that authorship is not about an otherworldly, ingenious process of creating something out of nothing. According to Pirandello, works of art and their meanings spring not from a single, directed consciousness but from a collaborative and often conflicted process of cobbling together stories and meaning.

The conflict over authorship in this play is fundamentally an argument about who controls the meaning of a text, and the Characters' frustrations and attempts to get revenge on their author demonstrate how they gained their own consciousness

and became independent of him. The Father announces that the Characters were "born of an author's fantasy" but "denied life by him." And yet they take life on their own and insist on staging their drama—that is, becoming the authors of their own destiny, controlling the meaning of their existence. The Son's doubt shows that the Characters' authorial impulses extend beyond seeking the life they were denied and challenges the other Characters' assumption that Characters must fully express themselves: the Son refuses to act, and instead declares that he wants to "stand in for the will of our author" by grinding the drama to a halt and refusing to turn the family's horrific story into a spectacle. The others' desire for drama overpowers his reluctance, however, and the final tragedy plays itself out without ever turning into the clean theatrical ending the Manager desires. As the Characters repeatedly try to demonstrate their personalities and recount their experiences, the Manager has to shut them down over and over because they threaten to throw the rehearsal (and his future play) out of balance. From the beginning, even before the Characters' arrival, the Manager is aware of his predicament: referencing the other Pirandello play that his troupe is supposedly rehearsing, he declares that "the author plays the fool with us all."

While the Characters and Manager attempt to take over the role of the author, their efforts inevitably fail, much like the author's initial attempt to control and put an end to his Characters. In the end, although the drama the Manager imagines fails to materialize and the **curtain** falls after an abrupt and unexplained tragedy, the play complicates straightforward notions of unitary authorship. Instead, it argues that authorship—the creation of a narrative and determination of its meaning—is a contested and collaborative process.

The Characters explicitly ask the Manager to be their author: he is the most obvious author-figure in the play because he directs how the Characters divulge their drama and how the action unfolds throughout the play, for instance by literally calling for the "curtain" that ends the Second Act. In fact, he does not mean to lower the curtain, but the Mechanist misinterprets him and does so, which suggests that the Manager's power over the play does not mean the play always obeys him—he is an author but without complete authorial control. The Step-Daughter and Father complicate this by also seeking to become authors: the Step-Daughter wants to control the stage decorations to make them as realistic as possible and the Father wants to determine the true philosophical meaning of events. Indeed, the other Characters accuse the Father of colluding backstage with the Manager to twist the story to his favor. Everyone ignores the Father's philosophical speeches, however, and the Manager refuses to heed the Step-Daughter's calls for detailed changes to the scenery because it is simply impossible given the constraints of the theater. In contrast to the messiness of the Characters' reality, the Manager's job is to make reality suitable for the theater, to "combine and group up all of the facts in one simultaneous, close-knit, action." Of course, Pirandello inverts this traditional rule: whereas "authors, as a rule, hide the labor of their creations" (according to the Father), in this play Pirandello foregrounds it.

Beyond merely raising the question of what a character really is and how they relate to the author who creates but then loses control over them, Pirandello's play shows that authorship is actually a complex process out of which a work emerges with no clear or singular impetus. In a sense, the Manager and Father are both reflections of Pirandello: the former of his attempts to create meaning as an author, and the latter of his own doubts about his existence and decisions. Characters are all reflections of and yet independent of an author; as the Manager puts it, the author is "never satisfied!" no matter how well their characters (and actors) play their parts. If there is any agent behind the process of creation, in which an author molds and consults with their own characters, it is the "Demon of Experiment"—the diabolically productive conflict among Characters each trying to express their truth, Actors who must interpret them, and the Manager who must keep them in balance and move the story forward. In a way, the entire play is a writer or dramatist's internal monologue as they work out the tensions between the whims of their characters and the necessity to create a coherent work.

ACTION, FATE, AND ABSURDITY

Six Characters in Search of an Author is often cited as an important influence on a whole generation of post-World War Two playwrights famous for "Theatre of the Absurd": plays that cope with the difficulty of making meaning out of an apparently meaningless world, especially in a modern society where people have lost the fixed moral codes previously enforced by religion, just as Pirandello's characters are "abandoned" by their author. The Characters enter the play existentially stuck, lacking an author but somehow full of detailed knowledge about how their story will end. Like actors onstage, they dutifully fulfill this fate, which is at once completely foreknown and completely shocking to both of their audiences—the Actors who are supposed to play them and the ticketholders filling the theater. They confront circumstances that at once make no sense and cannot possibly be avoided—in other words, they find themselves powerless before fate and nature, which they submit to against and despite their judgment, understanding, and desire to change.

The Characters step into an ambiguous world where things happen for no reason. The Characters' mysterious appearance does not only embody this principle; the Characters themselves also espouse it. One of the first things the Father says is that "life is full of infinite absurdities" that are true

nevertheless, and he later pontificates that "one is born to life in many forms," including that "one may also be born a character in a play." The Characters continue to show off the apparent absurdity of their existence when the Step-Daughter introduces herself cryptically, by insulting her brother (the Boy) and singing and dancing to a French song. The end of the play is also inexplicable and mechanical—the audience never learns why the Child drowns and the Boy shoots himself, nor whether the Boy killed the Child or all these events are related to the rest of the family's history of conflict and trauma.

Despite the meaninglessness of their lives and suffering, the Characters are bound to their fate, of which they themselves are the orchestrators. The Manager and the Actors reference this from the very beginning of the play, when they are rehearsing "Mixing It Up" and the Manager explains that the message of the play is the Leading Man's character "becom[ing] the puppet of [him]self."

The Characters are well aware of what they will do, even though they recognize it as horrible: during the First Act, the Step-Daughter and Father both explicitly say that they will have a sexual encounter, and then the Child and Boy will die. Indeed, the Father blames "the complicated torments of my spirit" for all his family's problems: even though they are the agents of their own destruction and fully aware of this throughout the play, the Characters are fully unable to stop it. The Father repeatedly insists that, although he spent his whole life trying to achieve "moral sanity" (to live sensibly and benevolently), he ultimately had to admit that "evil [...] may spring from good," such as how he destroyed his family despite his intelligence and best intentions.

The Father's philosophizing shows the role of thinking, reason, and art in relation to the meaninglessness of life: these faculties and products of mind allow people to make sense of their lives and their lack of control over their fates. But while people try to make the world and its events rational, ultimately they never can, and reason only operates in retrospect. The Father insists that his relentless theorizing is his way of "crying aloud the reason of [his] sufferings." The others criticize the Father for thinking he "has got the meaning of it all," and he twists this, arguing that he is trying to create "a meaning and a value" in his otherwise meaningless life. The Father is fully aware that his analysis does nothing, and yet he continues performing it: he believes that a word, phrase, or saying "tells us nothing and yet calms us" in a time of crisis. Even though he knows it is fleeting, he seeks meaning through reason in order to try and comfort himself in a world that he realizes has no inherent meaning. In contrast to the Father's philosophical monologues, the Mother responds to her family's crisis by suffering acutely and silently. Although she is much less of an annoyance to the rest of the people in the theater, she clearly also fares worse than the Father, whose analysis helps alleviate his pain.

The Father's philosophizing is inevitable, his way of responding to life's absurdity and making sense of his suffering, but it is also useless: it does nothing to concretely change his situation or his family's animosity toward him. They repeatedly tell him this, and the Manager interrupts him over and over by noting that his philosophizing does nothing to advance their immediate project: putting on a drama. There is no doubt that this condition is Pirandello's metaphor for the human condition at large: things happen, and people rush to explain them but inevitably fall short—and fall victim to the next inexplicable occurrence that their moral reckoning does little to prevent.

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

It is telling that the drama embodied by Pirandello's Characters, which on the surface might seem only tangentially relevant to the point of the play as a whole, is fundamentally about marriage, family, and gender. More specifically, it concerns the Characters' continual attempts—and consistent failures—to establish a functional household, to fulfill the ideal of the nuclear family that promises to resolve their conflicts and restore them to a stable, happy harmony. In a sense, they do succeed: of the Mother's three illegitimate children, two die tragically and one flees the stage, leaving the original nuclear family (Mother, Father, Son) together onstage. In short, while the Characters believe they can resolve their conflicts and create a happy nuclear family, it turns out that the very attempt to preserve the integrity of their family is the root of their problems, and their tragedy is inseparable from the restoration of their nuclear family. By elaborating this conflict, which echoes his own real-life family tragedy, Pirandello challenges the assumption that establishing a family is the key to success and happiness, instead suggesting that differences of personality—and the very pursuit of a perfect family—can tragically undermine the stability that a family is supposed to provide.

The Characters' family history already suggests that individual personality and autonomy are more important contributors to happiness than familial relations. At first, the Characters appear to be a complete, legitimate family comprised of two parents and four children. The Manager assumes this, and is quite confused when the Step-Daughter and Father begin to explain how the Mother came to have a second family with the Clerk. But as they start recounting their story, it becomes clear that the Characters are far from a harmonious family. Indeed, their problems stem precisely from their reunification: namely, the Step-Daughter's reunification with the Father at Madame Pace's brothel, and then the Son's disdain for the others who move in with him and the Father: the Mother who abandoned him more than a decade before and the new children he is supposed to treat as siblings. Their very separation stemmed from earlier problems between the Father, who sees himself as a creative soul full of "intellectual complications," and the simpleminded but deeply loving Mother. Both felt unfulfilled

because of their differences, and when the Mother began growing close to the Clerk who worked for the Father, the Father saw a chance to win his own independence and give her a more suitable partner in one fell swoop. Accordingly, he sent the Mother to live with the Clerk, and together they had three children (the Step-Daughter, Boy, and Child). The Father and Mother's strained relationship is to some extent a fictionalized version of Pirandello's poor match and lifelong conflict with his own long-suffering wife, who descended into a permanent mental illness after their families' mining fortunes suddenly disappeared in a natural disaster.

The Characters' tragic drama is fundamentally about the breakdown of family: the Father and Step-Daughter commit a kind of incest, violating the quintessential social rule that distinguishes relatives from everyone else. The Mother, Father, and Step-Daughter are all horrified at the Father and Step-Daughter's liaison—although they argue over whether or not it actually occurred, the very possibility of it is still horrifying enough, and the Mother cries and screams even when they re-enact it. The fright of the Father and Step-Daughter's meeting in Madame Pace's brothel is not just about the taboo, incestuous relationship between a middle-aged man and the teenage girl he used to visit at school—it is also about the exploitative power differential between them (as evidenced by the Mother's continual disdain for Madame Pace, who deceived her into letting the Step-Daughter become a prostitute). By breaking the principal rule of the family, the Father and Step-Daughter unmake their family symbolically and precipitate its inevitable self-destruction once everyone moves in under one roof.

The Father tries to save his family, but fails miserably and tears it apart even more horrifically than before. With the elemental rules of family broken, the Father attempts to undo his error by bringing the rest into his household—but the family's tensions only worsen, until they show up at the theater and demand to play them out on stage. They invert another basic rule of family: rather than preserving a nuclear family's privacy and trust, the Characters air their dirty laundry for the public to judge. As the Son puts it, his parents show the world their failure to truly fulfill the roles of "father and mother." But unlike the rest, to the Son ideals of family are irrelevant: he just wants to go on living his life, preferably while avoiding the family's drama. The deaths of the Father's other step-children (the Boy and the Child) at the end of the play are clearly tied to the reunited family's shame, which also drives the Step-Daughter to flee the stage (in most but not all versions of the play).

Ultimately, the play inverts the rules of family four times. First, the Father and Mother's apparently happy family is secretly a nightmare for both of them. Secondly, the Father rejects his wife to make space for his own personality, and thirdly the family is united by the Father and Step-Daughter's unspeakable affront to family. Finally, through the death of two children and the disappearance of another, the original family—Father, Mother, Son—is reunited and brandishes its shame onstage at the end of the play. In other words, the desired nuclear family emerges only as farce, as evidence that the Father's attempt to save his family for family's sake was pointless and possibly doomed to fail.

The tragic nature of the Characters' fate is not that they are duped by believing in the value of family, but that they wrongly think that the principle of family can and must be more important than all their differences and conflicts. Accordingly, they get the family they wanted—but only at a horrific cost.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CURTAIN

In most normal plays, the curtain is an unremarkable piece of equipment, useful only to mark the opening and closing of dramatic action to which it is irrelevant. The curtain between the audience and the actors clearly demarcates the line between fiction and reality—when it raises at the beginning of a performance, it invites the audience into a fantasy world, and when it lowers at a show's conclusion, it dismisses the audience to return to their lives.

But, given his interest in upending dramatic norms and challenging the conventional division between life and fiction, Pirandello does away with this normal use of the curtain for staging, and instead turns the curtain into an integral part of the play itself. The audience can first sense something is awry when they enter the theater and encounter the curtain raised, revealing "the stage as it usually is during the day time." The world of the audience and the world of the play start out merged, and remain that way throughout the show. During the 20-minute intermission after the First Act, the curtain also remains up and the audience's time merges with the play's.

The curtain becomes even more significant after the Step-Daughter and Father act out their sexual liaison at Madame Pace's atelier for the Manager and the Actors. Delighted with the Characters' scene, the Manager yells out "curtain here, curtain" in order to suggest that the scene would be the end of his future play's Act One. But the Machinist misunderstands the Manager and actually lowers the curtain. This abruptly ends the Second Act of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which flows directly into the third. Here, through the Manager, Pirandello explicitly points out the conventional use of the curtain and then defies it, having the curtain fall in his own play—and separate the audience's world from the drama's—only by accident. Overall, then, the curtain in *Six*

Characters represents Pirandello's exploration of metatheatrical elements in the play, and his attempts to tear down the divide between actors and audience, between theater and "real life."

THE REVOLVER

Recalling the Characters' bizarre entrance, Act Two of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* begins with a handful of inexplicable and seemingly absurd events. The Step-Daughter comes to the stage with her two siblings: the confused Child, whom she comforts, and the anxious Boy, whom she berates after she notices a revolver in his pocket.

The revolver at once fulfills and mocks the narrative conventions of the theater. On the one hand, it literally references Chekhov's famous declaration that "if you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off." This principle, commonly known as "Chekhov's gun"—that everything in a story must have and fulfill a specific purpose, that all loose ends must be tied up—is the essence of the Manager's quest to convert the Characters' messy and conflicted family drama into a coherent, neat story. While he wants to remove loose ends by "group[ing] up all the facts in one simultaneous, close-knit, action," the Characters want to express themselves individually and present their conflicting versions of events.

On the other hand, while the revolver points to the narrative principle that everything must have a place and purpose, it also foreshadows the utterly inexplicable conclusion of the story, which dismantles this narrative principle. Just before the final curtain, the Child drowns in the fountain and the Boy shoots himself. There is no explanation for why or how this happens, and the Actors, Characters, and audience never determine whether the Boy and Child are acting out their past experiences or actually dying before the Manager in the theater.

The revolver therefore first looks like a red herring: strange, out of context, and irrelevant to the Characters' drama, much like the Step-Daughter's French song and dance in the First Act. However, it is later revealed as a crucial part of the storyline—but only because it effects a conclusion that makes just as little sense as its initial appearance. This narrative double-cross allows Pirandello to challenge the apparent opposition between messy, conflicted, uncertain reality and clean, coherent storylines in which everything has a reason and effects a logical outcome.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* published in 1997.

Act 1 Quotes

Ridiculous? Ridiculous? Is it my fault if France won't send us any more good comedies, and we are reduced to putting on Pirandello's works, where nobody understands anything, and where the author plays the fool with us all?

Related Characters: The Manager (speaker), The Leading Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Manager leads his group of actors through a rehearsal of a fictional Pirandello play called "Mixing it Up." The Leading Man has to put on a chef's hat and complains that this is a "ridiculous" prop, but the Manager counters that the entire situation of the acting company is what is truly "ridiculous." They are being forced to put on a play they do not particularly like by a dramatist they do not particularly believe in; despite all their later claims about acting's importance as a serious art form, here they plainly see it as an onerous day job.

Beyond serving to introduce Pirandello's metatheatrical themes and shock the audience, which sees a playwright write about a theater company staging his own play, this passage is prophetic: the Manager clearly connects "Mixing it Up" to the play he and his Actors are participating in, in which they, the Characters, and (especially) the audience are thrown into a constant state of confusion and misunderstanding by the clash over competing narratives and pictures of truth. "The author" ends up "play[ing] the fool with [them] all" in a number of ways. On the one hand, he challenges the Manager's assumptions about what is true and false, suggesting that they are naïve and shortsighted, and therefore "play[s] the fool" by distorting the norms of reality (and, of course, the theater). On the other hand, the play's various author *figures*—the Manager himself, the Father, and to a lesser extent the Step-Daughter and the Son—are all proven to be fools as they attempt in vain to take full control over the play and its meanings. Pirandello therefore shows the Manager and Actor to be fools—and the very profession of the theater to be a form of "madness"—as well as revealing himself and every other author to be foolishly impotent in their attempts to control the works they write and characters they conceive.

"The empty form of reason without the fullness of instinct, which is blind."—You stand for reason, your wife is instinct. It's a mixing up of the parts, according to which you who act your own part become the puppet of yourself. Do you understand?

Related Characters: The Manager (speaker), The Leading Lady , The Leading Man

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

As they continue to rehearse "Mixing it Up," the Manager tells the Actors about the fundamental meaning of their parts. Specifically, he tells the Leading Man that he represents "reason" and the Leading Lady "instinct." This is a suspiciously accurate description of the Father and the Mother who soon walk onstage. The Father is adamantly and annoyingly intellectual, often so caught up in obsessive philosophizing that he ignores the reactions and emotions of everyone around him and ends up creating an egotistical spectacle rather than truly making amends for his actions, as he professes to want to do. On the other hand, the Mother almost never talks and even once insists she is incapable of doing so—instead, she spends the entire play suffering, embodying the emotional instincts that the Father lacks.

The tragedy of the Mother and Father's relationship is that, instead of allowing themselves to act as complements, the Father decides that the difference in their temperament makes them eternally incompatible and decides to send the Mother away instead. Of course, the close resemblance between "Mixing it Up" and the Six Characters, in addition to the fact that the Six Characters seriously "mix up" the roles of the Manager, Actors, and audience in the theater, suggests that perhaps they are not different at all—and that the Six Characters' arrival and performance might actually be the content of "Mixing it Up."

The second part of the Manager's directions for the Leading Man is curious because it points to the double character of acting in this play—both in the sense of performing on stage and in the sense of taking positive action in life. The Actors are at once audience to the Characters' drama and supposed to embody it in the future; the Characters themselves are both the object of their story and the subjects who portray it; and as the Characters act out their drama, they actively choose to fulfill a fate they have not chosen, in full awareness that they are both affecting and being affected by what they do.

A tenuous light surrounds them, almost as if irradiated by them—the faint breath of their fantastic reality.
This light will disappear when they come forward towards the actors. They preserve, however, something of the dream lightness in which they seem almost suspended; but this does not detract from the essential reality of their forms and expressions.

Related Characters: The Manager, The Door-Keeper, The Child, The Boy, The Son, The Step-Daughter, The Mother, The Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The Manager and Actors' rehearsal of "Mixing it Up" is abruptly interrupted when the door opens and the Door-Keeper announces the entrance of the Six Characters. These are the stage directions that govern how the Characters walk onstage and approach the Manager: they appear radiating a halo of light, which points to the fact that they are have stepped from fiction onto the stage. They are neither completely of this world nor completely alien to it—and yet, while their origin is uncertain, their *existence* in the world is anything but, which is what makes their inexplicable appearance onstage so eerie. Their light begins to fade as they enter the Actors' space and merge into a shared reality—they are living people with living bodies and yet have not been born and grown with the usual agency, indeterminacy, and complexity of normal people. They are "almost suspended" in the identities that have been set out for them by their author; they are too impudent and driven by single emotions and ideas. Although they are people with "essential reality," there is no question that they lack the trappings of a normal life—which perhaps means that their reality is not so fixed in its essence.

The FATHER (*coming forward a little, followed by the others who seem embarrassed*). As a manner of fact... we have come here in search of an author...
The MANAGER (*half angry, half amazed*). An author? What author?
The FATHER. Any author, sir.
The MANAGER. But there's no author here.

Related Characters: The Manager, The Father (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

When the Father first makes his appeal for an author (and explicitly gestures to the play's title), the Manager is understandably confused—the Father's request is silly and inexplicable. The theater needs a director to function, not an author. And besides, who needs to search for an author when they can simply be their own?

As in so many other moments throughout the play, however, the Manager's response here plays double duty: beyond his literal meaning (that no experienced playwright is in the theater, including specifically the author of the play they are rehearsing, Pirandello), he also sets out one of the play's principal conflicts—namely, the utter lack of any clear author figure throughout, even as everyone tries to take authorship over the Characters' drama. All these attempts fail, and ultimately the drama drives itself forward without anyone's orchestration or authorship.

> No, excuse me, I meant it for you, sir, who were crying out that you had no time to lose with madmen, while no one better than yourself knows that nature uses the instrument of human fantasy in order to pursue her high creative purpose.

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Manager

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

After the Manager dismisses the Father and his family as "mad people" who have wandered into the theater to disrupt his rehearsal, the Father turns the tables on him and argues that the Manager and his Actors are, in fact, the "madmen." The whole point of theater, he argues, is to perform an unreality, to reenact something that never happened, and to turn fantasy (or imagination, or madness) into reality. For the Characters to appear in the play is therefore just like for the Actors to appear as characters before their audiences—and both are equally noble pursuits of "high creative purpose." The very power of art, the Father argues, lies in its refusal of an intuitive or concrete distinction between reality and fantasy. Indeed, this is what lets artists use fantasy to enrich and transform reality.

> The author who created us alive no longer wished, or was no longer able, materially to put us into a work of art. And this was a real crime, sir; because he who has had the luck to be born a character can laugh even at death. He cannot die. The man, the writer, the instrument of the creation will die, but his creation does not die. And to live for ever, it does not need to have extraordinary gifts or to be able to work wonders. Who was Sancho Panza? Who was Don Abbondio? Yet they live eternally because—live germs as they were—they had the fortune to find a fecundating matrix, a fantasy which could raise and nourish them: make them live for ever!

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Manager

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis

The Father explains how he and his fellow Characters have come into being: an author birthed them through an act of creative imagination, but then decided never to write them into any story. At this point, however, the Characters' existence no longer depended on the will of their author: once created, they were real entities that could not be erased or forgotten. They then take revenge, taunting and seducing their author into giving them a story (both in Pirandello's mind and as they convince the Manager to stage their drama in this First Act of the play). Entering a story ("a fecundating matrix") allows them to turn from private into public ideas, ensuring they can continue to circulate forever and do not die alongside their author (just as readers and audiences can still experience them now, long after Pirandello's death).

In this passage, however, the Father is not only explaining his family's motive for presenting their story; he is also offering a philosophical theory about what is real and what is fake. While the Manager assumes that normal people who live outside narratives are more "real" (because they share the world with him and his actors), to literary characters, such readers and audiences are unimportant bystanders to the true, immortal reality. According to the Father, actors act to access the truth contained in characters, stories, and archetypes, rather than to lend truth to the parts they play.

> The whole trouble lies here. In words, words. Each one of us has within him a whole world of things, each man of us his own special world. And how can we ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value of things as I see them; while you who listen to me must inevitably translate them according to the conception of things each one of you has within himself. We think we understand each other, but we never really do. Look here! This woman (*indicating the Mother*) takes all my pity for her as a specially ferocious form of cruelty.

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Mother, The Step-Daughter, The Manager

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

When the Father and Step-Daughter begin recounting their versions of the family's story, it becomes clear to the audience that they simply cannot agree on what happened. Most importantly, the other characters singlehandedly blame the Father for what he sees as a combination of bad luck and lapses in judgment—sending his wife away out of "pity" and sleeping with the Step-Daughter whose identity he claims not to have known. He argues that the others' accusations against him are simply products of their misunderstanding, and that misunderstandings of this sort are simply an unavoidable part of human life. Accordingly, the Father is at once advancing a philosophical position about communication and translation—which has clear applications for the theater and the audience, who must inevitably come up with their own perspectives on the Father's actions and ideas—and making an excuse to try and avoid taking responsibility for his behavior. His philosophy carries the disturbing implication that it would be impossible to condemn him because it would be impossible to "understand" what he did and why he did it. This in turn raises one of the central problems critics see surrounding philosophies like the Father's: if everyone simply has their own perspective, is it possible to recognize and condemn evil?

> Oh, all these intellectual complications make me sick, disgust me—all this philosophy that uncovers the beast in man, and then seeks to save him, excuse him... I can't stand it, sir. When a man seeks to "simplify" life bestially, throwing aside every relic of humanity, every chaste aspiration, every pure feeling, all sense of ideality, duty, modesty, shame... then nothing is more revolting and nauseous than a certain kind of remorse—crocodiles' tears, that's what it is.

Related Characters: The Step-Daughter (speaker), The Manager, The Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

After she, the other Characters, and the Manager are forced to endure yet another philosophical monologue from the Father, the Step-Daughter calls him out for analyzing his actions and singing his woes on a public stage only in order to hide his actual lack of remorse. His "philosophy [...] uncovers the beast in man" not only because he makes arguments about the brutality of human nature, but also because his tendency to philosophize reveals his own egotism and lack of moral values. With her list of his faults, she specifically focuses on the latter—although the Father thinks he is searching for meaning and moral values, the Step-Daughter sees his search as a convenient way to give up on them.

And yet there is something ironic in the Step-Daughter's speech here: she, too, is using the public eye to try and save herself, to win the legitimacy and platform denied her by her family. Throughout the play, she acts with histrionic excess, as though she is performing rather than feeling her emotions—just as the Father labels and talks instead of feeling. In this way, the character of the Step-Daughter allows Pirandello to advance a critique of both theater and philosophy, which can come to replace real life rather than serving to enhance it.

For the drama lies all in this—in the conscience that I have, that each one of us has. We believe this conscience to be a single thing, but it is many-sided. There is one for this person, and another for that. Diverse consciences. So we have this illusion of being one person for all, of having a personality that is unique in all our acts. But it isn't true. We perceive this when, tragically perhaps, in something we do, we are as it were, suspended, caught up in the air on a kind of hook. Then we perceive that all of us was not in that act, and that it would be an atrocious injustice to judge us by that action alone, as if all our existence were summed up in that one deed.

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Step-Daughter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

After arguing that people have different and incompatible perspectives on the world, the Father takes his philosophy to an even greater extreme: he now also believes that individuals themselves are multiple, with various competing "conscience[s]" and "personalit[ies]" that determine their actions and relations with others. On one level, this is a serious argument about the nature of human beings, who are more complex than they're usually taken to be and whose identities are always difficult to precisely pin down. Indeed, for the Father, any claim about anyone's identity is dishonest; even the Characters, who he claims "really" exist because they exist in a fixed version in literature, still contain multiple identities and competing internal forces. This becomes a particularly curious and contradictory argument in the second version of Pirandello's play, in which each of the Characters wears a mask corresponding to an emotion that is supposedly essential and permanent for them (as in the longstanding tradition of *commedia dell'arte*). At the same time, there is some sense to the Father's argument—all concepts of forgiveness rely on the assumption that there is more to people than their worst deeds, and the Father is figuring out what it would look like to forgive himself in the future. As in every other instance when he questions what is real and what is false, here Pirandello does not resolve the question—rather he realizes two complementary truths: people are more than one thing, but certain things can nevertheless come to define them, although not necessary absolutely or forever.

The drama consists finally in this: when that mother re-enters my house, her family born outside of it, and shall we say superimposed on the original, ends with the death of the little girl, the tragedy of the boy and the flight of the elder daughter. It cannot go on, because it is foreign to its surroundings. So after much torment, we three remain: I, the mother, that son. Then, owing to the disappearance of that extraneous family, we too find ourselves strange to one another. We find we are living in an atmosphere of mortal desolation which is the revenge, as he (*indicating Son*) scornfully said of the Demon of Experiment, that unfortunately hides in me.

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Boy, The Child, The Step-Daughter, The Son, The Mother, The Manager

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Just before the end of the First Act, the Father offers this shocking prediction, which outlines exactly what will happen in the play's last scene: the Child ("the little girl") and the Boy die, and in most versions of the play the Step-Daughter ("the elder daughter") runs maniacally out of the theater, leaving the original but eternally-scarred nuclear family standing alone onstage. This ending makes an important commentary about the rigid social expectation that families must be legitimate and nuclear, and the Characters' ill-fated attempts to pursue and preserve this kind of family—which they ultimately achieve at the play's climax, but only through suffering a trauma they will probably never overcome.

But, at this stage in the play, the Father's prediction is more interesting because of what it reveals about his and his family's relationship to their future (and, arguably, their inescapable fates). In fact, the Step-Daughter has already made this same prediction earlier in the First Act, but both hers and the Father's predictions are likely to get lost in the mix, as both of them pontificate so wildly throughout the play and make so many statements that are hard to take seriously. As a result, audiences are often surprised when these exact predictions are fulfilled at the end of the play—as in any classical tragedy, the story's climax is both a foregone conclusion and a complete shock when it does happen. And Pirandello's Characters latch onto this feature of their story in order to make a broader argument about human life and action: people try to create one reality but inevitably end up fulfilling another—they are bound to their fates *because* of their efforts to build the future, not *despite* them. This contributes to the sense of meaninglessness and

futility in which the Father wallows throughout the play: like in quicksand, his family becomes more deeply trapped in their inevitable tragedy the harder they try to avoid it. This might be what the Father means by "the Demon of Experiment," a phrase with which he has in fact fulfilled another prophecy (the Son's) by mentioning.

Act 2 Quotes

❝ And they want to put it on the stage! If there was at least a reason for it! He thinks he has got at the meaning of it all. Just as if each one of us in every circumstance of life couldn't find his own explanation of it! (*Pauses.*) He complains he was discovered in a place where he ought not to have been seen, in a moment of his life which ought to have remained hidden and kept out of the reach of that convention which he has to maintain for other people. And what about my case? Haven't I had to reveal what no son ought ever to reveal: how father and mother live and are man and wife for themselves quite apart from that idea of father and mother which we give them?

Related Characters: The Son (speaker), The Father, The Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Near the beginning of the Second Act, the Son and the Mother voice their frustrations onstage while the Father, Manager, and Step-Daughter collude about their play behind the scenes. The Son is disgusted that the Father, on top of all his other crimes, now wants to bring the family's shameful history into the theater, making it a public spectacle. If the Father has destroyed the lives of his family members by continually breaking the fundamental rules of family—sending his wife to live with another man and sleeping with his Step-Daughter—then now he is doing it again by giving up the privacy that is usually inherent to a family. (Yet again, the Father's attempt to fix a problem only exacerbates it.) Even though the Son seemingly had nothing to do with the Father's crimes, he is being forced "to reveal what no son ought to ever reveal," in part breaking his own part in the family (maintaining trust and confidence). Interestingly, even though the Son has had little contact with his family for his whole life, he believes firmly in the conventions of family ("that idea of father and mother which we give them"), at least insofar as they affect his social status. Against his will, the Son is dragged into the drama and dragged down by the family that is supposed to support him. His calls for the play to stop, like the author's, go unanswered.

❝ Excuse me, all of you! Why are you so anxious to destroy in the name of a vulgar, commonplace sense of truth, this reality which comes to birth attracted and formed by the magic of the stage itself, which has indeed more right to live here than you, since it is much truer than you—if you don't mind my saying so? Which is the actress among you who is to play Madame Pace? Well, here is Madame Pace herself. And you will allow, I fancy, that the actress who acts her will be less true than this woman here, who is herself in person. You see my daughter recognized her and went over to her at once. Now you're going to witness the scene!

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), Madame Pace, The Step-Daughter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

When everyone is prepared to reenact the scene in which the Father meets the Step-Daughter in Madame Pace's brothel, they realize there is a problem: Madame Pace is not there. Unfazed, the Father starts hanging up the women Actors' clothes, convinced that Madame Pace will show up. And she does—as though by some magic, she walks into the theater and onstage, ready to perform her scene. The Manager and Actors are scandalized by this unlikely conjuration, but the Father insists that they are in the theater, after all—it makes no sense for actors, professional illusionists, to insist on "a vulgar, commonplace sense of truth" while considering "the magic of the stage" a scandalous lie. Of course, their objection is that the Father so easily does something they strain to do—to make fantasy appear as reality. Indeed, Madame Pace is inappropriate for the stage precisely because she is the *real* Madame Pace, not an actor. Because they are in a play, Madame Pace is allowed to simply show up, and Pirandello writes this in (and the Father, playing the author, brings it about) as though to protest the idea that things in the theater must happen in a logical progression—for they quite certainly do not in real life.

I never could stand rehearsing with the author present. He's never satisfied!

Related Characters: The Manager (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

The Manager's joke again points to the contradictions of a play without an author: both the one the audience is watching, in which the people onstage argue about what has happened to their author, and the one the Manager and Characters are trying to put on, over which they constantly battle for authorial control. The author, for the Manager, is "never satisfied" because no reenactment of a piece can ever match an author's mental image of a story—one that no author can ever directly translate onto the page, for (as the Father has already noted) language inevitably leads to miscommunication. As a parallel, the Actors' reenactment of the brothel scene looks comically out of balance to the Father and Step-Daughter who lived it. While they claim access to the real experience of the scene, however, their version was also far from adequate for the stage (as the Manager repeatedly notes). And their authorial presence—and constant insistence that the actors faithfully perform their reality—actually gets in the way of the rehearsal.

The Manager is therefore pointing to the impossibility of ever performing a story perfectly on two levels, then: on the surface, the problem of miscommunication through interpretation, and more fundamentally, the impossibility of ever determining what a "perfect" interpretation would be, since the author (in this play as in any other) does not get to define a work's meaning any more than the reader, actor, or director does.

Acting is our business here. Truth up to a certain point, but no further.

Related Characters: The Manager (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

When the Actors are rehearsing the scene between the Step-Daughter and the Father in Madame Pace's brothel, the Manager tells the Leading Man to ask the Leading Lady about whose death she is mourning. The Step-Daughter interjects and explains that, in reality, the Father reacted to her being dressed for mourning by suggesting she "take off [her] little frock." Scandalized, the Manager recoils and declares that this detail cannot possibly go to the stage—although it uniquely reveals the extent to which the Father mistreated and violated his family, it would simply "make a riot in the theater!" The Manager follows with the above declaration, again drawing a clear line between the version of reality presented in the theater and the one that people actually live out. The theater is not supposed to tell real stories—rather, it tells fictional versions of them. The Characters will not be able to control how their story is told, but only provide the raw material, the fundamental truths of which will be communicated through a distorted narrative. They are the sources, not the authors.

Of course, the Manager's line is also a comment on Pirandello's play itself. First, although the Father's clumsy seduction techniques will not go into the Manager's play, they are plainly revealed in Pirandello's, and through this process Pirandello points to the transgressive nature of his own play, in terms of moral and cultural boundaries as much as narrative ones. (The audience felt the same way—they reacted so strongly at the play's premiere that Pirandello had to sneak out of the theater and past the angry mob that formed outside.) But the Manager's line also references the whole realm of truths that are too scandalous for even his intentionally scandalous play, most of all the unspoken secrets that remain within the family: did the Mother actually catch the Father and Step-Daughter "in time?" Did the Father know the Step-Daughter's identity? Has their relationship continued? What other distortions color the Father's story? What does the Son refuse to act and narrate? And might the relations of parenthood among the Father, Mother, Clerk, Son, Step-Daughter and two young children be more complex or incestuous than they already appear on the surface?

> On the stage you can't have a character becoming too prominent and overshadowing all the others. The thing is to pack them all into a neat little framework and then act what is actable. I am aware of the fact that everyone has his own interior life which he wants very much to put forward. But the difficulty lies in this fact: to set out just so much as is necessary for the stage, taking the other characters into consideration, and at the same time hint at the unrevealed interior life of each. I am willing to admit, my dear young lady, that from your point of view it would be a fine idea if each character couldtell the public all his troubles in a nice monologue or a regular one hour lecture (*good humoredly*). You must restrain yourself, my dear, and in our own interest, too; because this fury of yours, this exaggerated disgust you show, may make a bad impression, you know. After you have confessed to me that there were others before him at Madame Pace's and more than once…

Related Characters: The Manager (speaker), Madame Pace, The Father, The Step-Daughter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37-8

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the play's Second Act, the Father and Step-Daughter fall more and more out of line: they interrupt each other with lengthy monologues and repeatedly cut off the progress of the scene that they (and later the Actors) are supposed to be performing. The increasingly frustrated Manager finally explodes at the Step-Daughter, reminding him that *he* is in charge and that stories are not well served by Characters who analyze themselves, spoiling all the fun and secrets for the audience or reader. (Although this play leaves plenty such secrets open for discovery.)

The Manager's rant about creating "a neat little framework" is both a clear description of his job as a theatrical director and a claim about authorship more broadly—specifically, the principal rule of authorship that Pirandello has deliberately broken throughout this play. Rather than a philosophical tract that clearly states its point or a normal work of fiction that buries theory in a story, Pirandello's play repeatedly puts analysis in the way of narrative, all while refusing to make the analysis clear enough to unambiguously communicate his point. It is, in some ways, a play as frustrating to watch as the Manager finds it to direct—and this is the point, the process by which Pirandello exposes the true, thorny work of authorship. The Manager, as the orchestrator and streamliner of the whole production, is also not exempt: his final threat to the Step-Daughter suggests that he considers her decision to supposedly morally compromise herself by working as a prostitute when her family needed the money as resolutely worse than the Father's decision to visit her. In short, the Manager is already taking the Father's side, which lends credibility to the Step-Daughter's theory that he is colluding with the Father to twist the narrative and make the Father look less culpable than he was in reality.

> The darned idiot! I said "curtain" to show the act should end there, and he goes and lets it down in earnest (*to the Father, while he pulls the curtain back to go on to the stage again*). Yes, yes, it's all right. Effect certain! That's the right ending. I'll guarantee the first act at any rate.

Related Characters: The Manager (speaker), The Machinist, The Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

The Second Act ends with an accident: the Manager, scheming out loud about his plans to monetize the Characters' experiences as a stage drama, declares that the scene between the Father and the Step-Daughter has satisfactorily ended, and that the First Act of his future play should end there with the "curtain." Hearing the Manager yell "curtain," the Machinist wrongly assumes that the Manager wants the curtain lowered and does so—the Manager then utters this line as he steps past the curtain, which has just fallen for the first time since the audience initially walked into the theater. In fact, the stage crew actually *is* working behind the curtains to set up for the garden scene at the end of the play, even though this break between the Second and Third Acts is supposedly purely accidental.

The falling of the curtain here performs a leveling function, bringing the play as the audience sees it, the scene the Characters are acting out, and the future play the Manager is planning in his mind all onto the same plane of reality. The Manager makes the curtain fall because of his future play, which cuts off the Characters' rehearsal and the actual play the audience is watching. Rather than acting as a blank backdrop with no meaning except to open and close the audience's access to the fantasy world of the stage, the curtain becomes a prop in its own right, an essential part of

the play.

Act 3 Quotes

The illusion! For Heaven's sake, don't say illusion. Please don't use that word, which is particularly painful for us.

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Leading Man, The Leading Lady , The Manager

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Early in the Third Act, the Step-Daughter, the Manager, and some of the Actors argue about how to stage the next portion of the Characters' drama—will they tell it in multiple scenes with multiple sets, showing it to have occurred in different places at different times, as it actually did? Or will they combine it all into one scene, which might offer a more dramatic story that better expresses the family's pain, despite distorting the authenticity of the narrative? The Step-Daughter argues for authenticity to the Characters' history, but the Manager wants to stage everything in one scene. The Leading Lady and Leading Man suggest two scenes, with one change between them, as a compromise that will "make the illusion easier." (Of course, they are also referencing the play they are in, which has just seen its one and only scene change.)

This is the Father's impassioned and offended response: the Leading Lady should not call the future play an "illusion." First, this reinforces the apparently mistaken notion that the theater creates "illusions" of a "reality" that exists outside of it. Ironically, the Father has made exactly this argument many times before—but here, he begins to insist that there is really no distinction between the stage and life, which is fitting in view of the way reality and theatrical performance get completely confused in the coming section of Act Three. Secondly, the Father seems to be reacting to the way the word "illusion" can be used to imply that the Characters themselves are not "really" real, when in fact they are living and breathing just like the Actors and Manager.

The FATHER. Can you tell me who you are?
The MANAGER (*perplexed, half smiling*). What? Who am I? I am myself.
The FATHER. And if I were to tell you that that isn't true, because you are I...?

Related Characters: The Manager, The Father (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In their umpteenth argument about reality, illusion, and the stage, the Father presents this challenge to the Manager. If the Characters are not "real" because they live only in a work of art, the Father suggests, then the Manager should at least be able to explain why he is more "real" than they are. But he does not have any way of grounding his identity, of explaining *what* he is or *why* he exists—his identity is merely his being himself, and unlike the Characters, this is not something he ever questions.

Beyond questioning whether or not normal people actually have any kind of substantive identity, the Father also draws an explicit parallel between himself and the Manager. They are, in many ways, mirrors of one another: each is the leading figure of one-half of the people on stage, and the two are primarily responsible for telling the story that the audience (and, the Manager hopes, future paying audiences) gets to see. More than anyone else, they are the two author figures in the play, and they also clearly represent different dimensions of the author himself, Luigi Pirandello: the Father as him in his personal life, struggling with his decisions and the meaning of his existence, and the Manager as him in his professional life, self-assured, powerful, and charged with balancing various characters and ideas in order to sell a coherent story. Their conflict therefore represents not only the conflict between an author and their characters or a director and their actors or script, but also the internal conflicts in an author's (specifically, Pirandello's) mind as they formulate and write a story.

If you think of all those illusions that mean nothing to you now, of all those things which don't even *seem* to you to exist any more, while once they *were* for you, don't you feel that—I won't say these boards—but the very earth under your feet is sinking away from you when you reflect that in the same way this you as you feel it today—all this present reality of yours—is fated to seem a mere illusion to you tomorrow?

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Manager

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43-4

Explanation and Analysis

As they continue to debate whether the Characters or the Actors and Manager are "real" people, the Father returns to his previous claim: that people who live in art and fiction have real, essential identities, whereas normal, mortal humans are not anything at all. He makes this argument by citing the classic version of the philosophical problem of personal identity: because people constantly change, how can they remain the same people? In extreme cases, one might ask if someone who has entered a permanent coma or had various organ transplants remains, essentially, the same person—and, if so, what makes them so. For the Father, the answer is simple: because normal people like the Actors and Manager change so much, they are multiple people throughout their lives, but never one essential or unchanging thing. The notion that an individual human has any fixed identity is "a mere illusion"—but the Characters *do* have fixed identities, since they are limited by the works in which they are written. Their existences are finite and bound, and so they can be defined and have real identities, whereas the openness, fluidity, and indeterminacy of "normal" human life means that the Manager, not the Father, is the one who does not know who he really is. Curiously, immediately before this passage, the Manager tries to shut up the Father by reminding him that *he* (the Manager) is in charge of the theater—this is the Manager's identity, not only because it is his role in the play but also likely because it is how he defines himself when he is not busy directing a rehearsal. As he challenges the Manager's identity, the Father also challenges the Manager's power in the theater, making "the very earth under [his] feet [...] sink away" in the process.

> I'm not philosophizing: I'm crying aloud the reason of my sufferings.

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Manager

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

When the fed-up Manager tells the Father once and for all to shut up and stop "philosophizing," this is the Father's response. What for everyone else looks like a meaningless game of analysis is, for the Father, a meaningful attempt to stake a claim in the world and explain his existence. While the other Characters see the Father's "philosophizing" as a series of excuses for his behavior (which he should instead acknowledge and repent for), he believes that he is gaining some understanding and creating some conciliatory meaning of the randomness and pointlessness of his experiences. For him, then, his analysis performs an important existential function, guiding him in the darkness, if only by helping him understand the path he has already taken. Ultimately, there is no real truth of the matter about which of these the Father is doing: his speeches certainly help him explain "the reason of [his] sufferings," but they are also vacuous and long-winded enough to perpetually annoy the others and detract from the force of his apologies (which are weak enough to begin with).

> Authors, as a rule, hide the labour of their creations. When the characters are really alive before their author, the latter does nothing but follow them in their action, in their words, in the situations which they suggest to him; and he has to will them the way they will themselves—for there's trouble if he doesn't. When a character is born, he acquires at once such an independence, even of his own author, that he can be imagined by everybody even in many other situations where the author never dreamed of placing him; and so he acquires for himself a meaning which the author never thought of giving him.

Related Characters: The Father (speaker), The Manager

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Pirandello breaks the rules he has the Father explain here, precisely by having the Father explain them. He explicitly tells the audience that authors are supposed to keep silent, but by writing a whole play about the struggle over authorship and independence of Characters from their authors, he is drawing attention to rather than concealing "the labour of [his] creations." Indeed, he does this throughout the play, for instance by staging the Characters' quest for their author in a theater rehearsal, during the long process of preparation and polishing that actors and

directors must work through before offering a completed show to the public.

But Pirandello does not break all these rules of authorship simply for the sake of innovation or rebellion. Instead, he does so precisely in order to illuminate another important truth about authorship: it is not an individual, one-directional process in which an author produces a finished text out of pure imagination. Rather, it is a collaboration between different figments of an author's mind: their guiding sense of narrative continuity (represented in the play by the Manager), their philosophical inclinations and desire to relay a message through their work (the Father), their sense of drama and aesthetic taste (the Step-Daughter), their internal censor (the Son), etc. And authors do not invent characters and then confine them to the contexts of their invention—rather, they experiment with different traits and situations for each character, developing a character in dialogue with the story and developing a story in dialogue with each character. Like a good actor, a good author must stay "in character"—they must allow their characters to act as they would if they were real, living people, and Pirandello illuminates this principle by taking it to its logical conclusion in this play.

> The SON (*to Manager who stops him*). I've got nothing to do with this affair. Let me go please! Let me go!
> The MANAGER. What do you mean by saying you've got nothing to do with this?
> The STEP-DAUGHTER (*calmly, with irony*). Don't bother to stop him: he won't go away.
> The FATHER. He has to act the terrible scene in the garden with his mother.
> The SON (*suddenly resolute and with dignity*). I shall act nothing at all. I've said so from the very beginning (*to the Manager*). Let me go!

Related Characters: The Father, The Step-Daughter, The Manager, The Son (speaker), The Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Just before the play's fateful final scene, the Manager and Father insist that the Son participate in their drama by acting a supposedly crucial scene with his increasingly-desperate Mother. The Son refuses, over and over—and while the play ultimately goes on, he does manage to keep this one scene out of the public's view, preserving some semblance of privacy and autonomy, and ensuring that he remains "an 'unrealized' character, dramatically speaking." The audience also never learns the full extent of his involvement in, or even partial responsibility for, the deaths of his two younger step-siblings.

However, despite his profound objection to the Characters playing out their drama onstage, he has no choice but to take part in it—he quite literally cannot leave, no matter how much he wants to. He is incarcerated in his story and on the stage; even if he chooses to "act nothing at all," he has no choice but to become part of the action. In this sense, he has much more in common with his Father than he chooses to admit—both of them recognize and lament the fact that they are trapped in their lives and bound to their disagreeable fates. This is also a commentary on the human condition more broadly: people are stuck in their worlds whether they want to be or not, with no available escape and no choice except to make the best of their conditions and hopefully create some meaning in their lives.

> SOME ACTORS. He's dead! dead!
> OTHER ACTORS. No, no, it's only make believe, it's only pretence!
> The FATHER (with a terrible cry). Pretence? Reality, sir, reality!
> The MANAGER. Pretence? Reality? To Hell with it all! Never in my life has such a thing happened to me. I've lost a whole day over these people, a whole day!
> *Curtain.*

Related Characters: The Manager, The Father (speaker), The Child, The Boy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Six Characters in Search of an Author ends without resolution. Although predicted by both the Father and the Step-Daughter, the ending is left unexplained and the crucial questions unanswered: does the Boy kill the Child? How does the Boy get the revolver? Why does he shoot himself? Why (in most versions) does the Step-Daughter laugh demonically as she runs out of the theater? What really happened between the Son and the Mother? And, most importantly, do the Boy and the Child really die during the

rehearsal, or are they merely acting out something that already happened in the past? (If so, how are they around to do it?)

In short, the play ends as it began, with no clear distinction between the world the audience is made to consider real (the Manager and Actors' rehearsal) and the supposedly fictional world of the visitors who present themselves as Characters needing to play out their drama. Just like the audience, the Manager and Actors themselves cannot tell what is and is not true—opposites like "pretence" and "reality," frontstage and backstage, and acting a part and acting of one's own volition become caught up in one another. Pirandello rejects them resolutely, showing the audience how absurd, unmotivated, and inexplicable events are what drive life forward, and how one person's fantasy can easily be another's reality. Ultimately, he shows the audience only one thing that can be taken as an incontrovertible truth: they have "lost a whole day" (or evening) watching this play and probably have little to show for it.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

The stage directions begin by noting that "the Comedy is without acts or scenes," even though the text is divided into three acts, separated by natural pauses in the texts. The **curtain** is raised from the beginning, with "the stage as it usually is during the day time." At the beginning of the play, the Actors walk onstage and wait for the Manager so they can begin rehearsing Luigi Pirandello's play "Mixing it Up." The Manager then arrives, looks through his mail, orders the Property Man to set up the lights, and orders the Actors to begin rehearsing the second act of their play.

Through his initial directions, Luigi Pirandello immediately throws away the conventions of theatrical form. The raised curtain indicates that, rather than waiting for a fictional world to reveal itself, the audience walks into a theater that has been waiting for them*—without the curtain, nothing clearly separates the audience's lives from the world of the stage. And the setting—a theater rehearsal of a different Pirandello play—raises questions about how an author can exist in a fictional world of their own creation, whether the play is supposed to be in a fictional world at all, and who the people onstage truly are: actors playing a part, actors playing actors playing a part, or perhaps merely themselves.*

The Prompter reads the stage directions for the Second Act of "Mixing it Up," and the Manager tells the Property Man to prepare the set. The play requires the Leading Man to wear a chef's hat and he objects that this is "ridiculous." The Manager declares that what is really "ridiculous" is having to stage Pirandello's incomprehensible play, in which "the author plays the fool with us all." He screams that the Leading Man must follow directions, and that "Mixing it Up" is about him (who represents reason) "becom[ing] the puppet of [him]self." The Manager and Leading Man agree that neither of them understand this, and the Manager predicts their production will be a "glorious failure" before yelling again at the Leading Man to follow instructions.

"Mixing it Up," whose title refers to the role changes and inversions among actors, authors, characters, and the audience throughout this work, is not a real play (although other versions of this work have the Manager and Actors rehearse a real Pirandello play). The Manager's ironic disdain for Pirandello—penned, of course, by Pirandello himself—foreshadows this play's absurd twists and "glorious failure" to meet genre standards, and also shows how the Manager and Actors (both the people onstage and the characters they embody) are caught in a kind of absurd existential bind, forced to perform roles they neither chose nor necessarily enjoy. If acting merely means being one's own puppet-master—turning oneself into what one is not and thereby imprisoning oneself in a prewritten role—then the validity of the whole enterprise falls into doubt.

Suddenly, the Door-Keeper and Six Characters enter, surrounded by "a tenuous light [...] the faint breath of their fantastic reality," which fades when they approach the other Actors. The first of the Characters, the chubby, roughly 50-year-old Father, has thinning red hair and a thick moustache, and "is alternatively mellifluous and violent." The second, the Mother, "seems crushed and terrified." She wears black and covers her "wax-like face" with a veil. The "beautiful" teenaged Step-Daughter is also dressed for mourning, and seems to hate the "timid [and] half-frightened" Boy but love the Child, her young sister of about four, who is clad in white. The 22-year-old Son hates the Father and does not care about the Mother.

Pirandello's stage directions calling for "a tenuous light" are an explicit attempt to create ambiguity about whether the Characters are real, illusionary, both, or somewhere in between. Although the audience knows nothing about them, the six newcomers' dispositions suggest that they are a family and that there are protracted tensions among them. While most literature starts with an innocuous status quo and then hurls its protagonists toward a climax, Pirandello's Characters seem to have already reached their literary climax—the Manager and Actors' play-within-a-play is rivalled by the drama that seems to have already taken place among the Characters. It notable that, in his revised version of the play, Pirandello recommends that the Characters wear masks throughout the performance, permanently sticking each of them with a particular emotion.

The Door-Keeper reports that "these people are asking for" the Manager, who furiously replies that his rehearsals are closed to visitors, and asks the Characters who they are and why they have come. The Father shyly reports that "we have come here in search of an author," and the Manager is confused—they are rehearsing an old play, whose author is not present. The Step-Daughter delightedly offers that the Characters can "be your new piece," but the Father objects that they need an author before offering the suspicious Manager to "bring you a drama, sir."

As the audience is likely to do, the Manager—who now stands in for this audience to some extent—initially takes the Characters literally and thinks they are looking for Pirandello (the author of "Mixing it Up") or someone to help them fulfill some collective literary aspiration. Already, the conventional direction of authorship is inverted: rather than an author imagining a world into being, which is then actually created onstage, here the Characters appear to be demanding that their reality be turned into fiction.

The Manager tries to send the Characters away, calling them "mad people," but the Father insists that "life is full of infinite absurdities" that apparently lack logic, and that theater is *true* madness, the opposite of this: "creat[ing] credible situations, in order that they may appear true." The Actors are offended and the Managers asks if the Father really thinks theater is a "profession [...] worthy of madmen." The Manager insists he and his Actors "are proud to have given life to immortal works," and the Father agrees that fictional characters are "less real perhaps, but truer" than living beings. The Manager therefore derides "madmen" at the same time as he admits his job relies on "the instrument of human fantasy."

The Father's argument takes Pirandello's meta-theater to another level: rather than just challenging the line between reality and illusion, Pirandello is now openly denouncing it onstage, forcing the actors performing Six Characters in Search of an Author *to publicly discredit themselves and ridicule their profession for an audience that has come to watch them work. The notion that "life is full of infinite absurdities" suggests that audiences and readers might never get a good, concrete explanation for why and how the Characters showed up onstage: rather, the audience must simply cope with the brute fact of the Characters' existence, no matter how absurd, just as the Characters must deal with their author's abandonment and the Manager must now deal with the impossible-yet-undeniably-real Characters before him.*

The Father means only to show the Manager "that one is born to life in many forms," and that "one may also be born a character in a play," like himself and the others who have entered the theater. The Characters "carry in [them] a drama," but the Manager has no interest in it, and the Father objects that the Manager only does not see them as Characters because they are *alive*, rather than from a book. The Step-Daughter insists they "are really six more interesting characters," and the Father explains that their author created them but never inserted them into a work. He jokes that he and his fellow Characters are lucky to "live eternally" while their creator dies. And they have come "to live [...] for a moment [...] in you," the Actors and the Manager. They are eager to release the drama they contain.

The Manager's conventional view of life as real and art as fictional clashes with the Characters' insistence that, although they started out as ideas in someone's mind, they are just as real *as normal people or things. In fact, the Father's insistence that characters "live eternally" suggests that, in some way, characters are* more *real than normal people, more deeply embedded in the universe than humans who change, die, and disappear. The fact that characters outlive their authors shows that authors never have full control over their creations—not only do their characters have minds and "drama" of their own, but their work gets interpreted and re-signified throughout the ages, by audiences and actors alike. Turning to the Actors, the Father raises the question of whether an actor inhabits a character or a character inhabits an actor—which is the vessel, and which is the substance?*

The Step-Daughter begins, yelling about her "passion for him! [the Father]," declaring that she is "a two months' orphan," and singing and dancing to a brief French tune. The Father declares her "worse than mad," and she insists that God will "take this dear little child away from that poor mother there," the Boy will do "the stupidest things, like the fool he is," and she will herself run away because of "what has taken place between him [the Father] and me." She declares that the Son hates her, the Boy, the Child, and the Mother because he is her only legitimate offspring. The Mother faints and the Actors care for her and bring her a chair. The Father lifts her veil, against her objections, which leads her to cover her face using her hands and protest about the Father's "loathsome" plan.

The Step-Daughter puts on a spectacle, acting out in a way that seems inappropriately juvenile for an eighteen-year-old—especially one who proclaims her sexual "passion." Although her declarations about the family look like senseless ramblings now, they later end up making sense. This is the opposite of dramatic irony, with the Characters knowing something that their audiences—the Manager and his Actors, and the audience in the theater—do not. In fact, they directly tell these audiences what they do not know. This is thus also the opposite of verbal irony: the Step-Daughter directly says what will happen, giving away the mystery of the family's pain and the climax of the play, but because of the extraordinary circumstances of her and the other Characters' arrival in the theater, no one takes her at face value and everyone assumes she cannot be telling the truth. She appears to be an unreliable narrator but ultimately proves the opposite: she is merely declaring the family's horrible but unavoidable fate.

Confused, the Manager asks if the Father and Mother are married—they are—and then why the Mother is dressed like a widow. Her old lover (the Clerk) died two months before, the Step-Daughter explains, but the Father insists the man is not dead—he is merely not present, because the real drama is about the Mother's *children*, not her lovers. The Mother cries out that the Father "forced [her] to go away with" the other lover, but the Step-Daughter denies it, claiming she only uses this story to make the Son, whom she abandoned as an infant, feel better. The Step-Daughter forces the Mother to admit that she enjoyed her time with her lover, the Step-Daughter's father, and then yells at the Boy, asking him why he does not talk. The Father admits that he sent the Mother. The Actors respond with interest, and the Leading Lady proclaims that "we are the audience this time."

The confused Manager has to unthink his expectations about the Characters, whom he—and likely the audience—initially believed were a conventional nuclear family (married cohabitating opposite-gender parents and their "legitimate" biological children). As throughout the play, appearances are deceiving: the existence of the family is actually predicated on the undermining of the foundational norms of family and marriage—not only the Mother's infidelity, but the Father's complicity in it. The Leading Lady directly announces what everyone already knows: the theater has turned on its head. The Actors have become an audience, the Characters have become actors, and the author and director seem to have given up their power.

The Son declares that the Father will now bring up "the Demon of Experiment." The Father replies that the Son is a "cynical imbecile" and always jokes about this phrase—he believes a phrase "tells us nothing and yet calms us" in the face of difficulties and hardships. The Step-Daughter brings up "the case of remorse" and accuses the Father of offering her money, presumably for sex, in a room whose furniture she recalls in detail. The Manager professes his confusion, and the Father tries to clarify that all words create misunderstandings because everyone has their own picture of the world, and so people are always translating between them by means of words. He repeats that he did not reject the Mother, who claims she does not "know how to talk," and that he loves her humility—but then begins berating her, calling her "deaf, deaf, mentally deaf!" The Step-Daughter says the Father's intelligence is worthless, and the Father admits that sometimes "evil [...] may spring from good."

The Son's predictions (which later, like all the predictions in this play, prove true) again show that the audience receives the drama in reverse, trying to understand what has already happened among the Characters that makes them act like they do. His insistence that the Father will inevitably and annoyingly talk about "the Demon of the Experiment" and the Father's own cynicism about the use of language both suggest that people's efforts to control and improve the world always fall short—people can think or talk endlessly and not change the fundamentally random nature of life and inevitable nature of fate. As the Father himself points out, his phrase is ambiguous—it "tells us nothing." It can mean almost anything: a vision of life as a grand experiment with no fixed answers and no clear truths to guide human action, the Father's specific remorse about the ill-fated "experiments" he performed on his family, the way the family's events resulted from complex circumstances, or even the way creating works of art is a constantly experimental process, based in cooperation and conflict among various forces (characters, events, actors, writers, and audiences). Finally, the Step-Sister directly points to the other event at the heart of the family's conflict: the taboo, incestuous liaison between her and the father.

"Biting her lips with rage at seeing the Leading Man flirting with the Step-Daughter," the Leading Lady proposes they continue the rehearsal, but the Manager and other Actors reject her appeal and ask the Father for his full story. He explains that his old clerk became close friends with the Mother, and they turned against him. He fired the clerk, but the Mother grew depressed, "like an animal without a master."

The apparently budding love triangle among the Leading Lady, Leading Man, and Step-Daughter again shows how, in the theater, reality easily blurs into fiction (in which the Leading Lady and the Leading Man are a romantic pair, and in which the Step-Daughter is actually supposed to live).

The Father admits that he took away the Son "so that he should grow up healthy and strong by living in the country," and while he agrees with the Step-Daughter that the Son is now anything but, he blames the wet nurse he hired for him (and then married). He considers this a mistake along the noble quest for "moral sanity," and while the Step-Daughter sees his visits to "certain ateliers like that of Madame Pace" as evidence to the contrary, he insists that "this seeming contradiction" is proof of his masculinity. He admits that, bored with the Mother, he "sent her to that man" (the Clerk), but "more for her sake than mine," because of his "pure interest" in her well-being.

While the Mother and Father were clearly a poor match from the beginning of their marriage, the audience never learns what really happened and has to decide whether or not to trust the Father's version of events. Indeed, the Father's propensity to blame the woman who nursed his Son for the young man's relative weakness (rather than recent circumstances or his own parenting, for example) gives the audience a good reason to believe the Father is far from a reliable storyteller when it comes to remembering his own past. While he is doing all the explaining, it is also clear that he is telling this story—becoming his own author, in a way—in order to hide *the truth, not reveal it. He wants to avoid remorse rather than express it.*

The Step-Daughter claims that the Father did care, enough to visit her school and watch her from a distance during her childhood. He is mortally offended but explains himself: with his house empty, he started obsessing over the Mother's family, and prove that she was "fortunate and happy because [she was] far away from the complicated torments of my spirit." The Step-Daughter remembers being confused, and the Mother keeping her out of school, whenever the Father visited (and "came close to" and "caressed" her).

While the Step-Daughter makes it sound like the Father had a perverse, pedophilic, and possibly vengeful obsession with her from early childhood, the Father portrays his behavior as an attempt to reunite the family, and in fact also an early attempt at repentance (to make amends for the sin of sending his wife away). Again, the boundaries of sexual desire and family love are contorted beyond recognition, and it is impossible to tell whether the Father's actions are forming or destroying the normal domestic family he claims to want.

In an aside, the Manager, Father, and Step-Daughter agree that these events cannot be turned into drama, but the Father promises that "the drama is coming." When the Clerk died two months ago, the Father heard from the family abruptly, after a long time—they had moved away and left "no trace" many years before. The Father laments his age, which is "not old enough to do without women, and not young enough to go and look for one without shame." He reveals that he indulged his "temptation," something he thinks most men would do in private but refuse to admit openly—women, he argues, willingly blind themselves to such truths. The Step-Daughter disagrees, saying that women are not blind to men's lack of love, and the way they use "all these intellectual complications" and philosophy to try and cover it up.

The mini-deliberation about how to turn the Characters' supposedly-lived "drama" into a stage drama again merges the three levels of theatrical and temporal action: the audience watching events onstage (who learn that the best is yet to come), the Manager hunting for a successful future play, and the Characters reenacting their drama in the past. Life is evaluated according to its fitness for being turned into fiction, at the same time as the people who claim to have lived that life also claim to be fictional beings. Rejecting the confidence usually associated with the family in exchange for the public forum of a stage, the Father seems at once brave and dishonest: he announces his (and humankind's) imperfection, but uses that as an excuse to avoid responsibility.

After the Clerk's death, the Father explains, the Mother became a modiste (dressmaker) at Madame Pace's atelier—a high-class one, the Step-Daughter insists, but the Mother regrets never knowing that "the old hag [Madame Pace] offered me work because she had her eye on my daughter." One day, the Father visited Pace's brothel and met the Step-Daughter, before the Mother intervened—"almost in time!" declares the Step-Daughter, but the Father protests, "in time! In time!"

After the Clerk's death and the destabilization of his and the Mother's family (including the three children who are supposedly theirs, the Step-Daughter, Boy, and Child), the family falls into financial ruin and Madame Pace takes advantage of their vulnerability. This turn of fate was not uncommon in the early 20th century, because men were essentially supposed to make incomes on which their wives and families would be completely dependent. (Divorce was not even legal in Italy at the time.) This helps explain why Pirandello's Characters (especially the Father) remain viscerally committed to the idea of the nuclear family, even while destroying it over and over again. The Father's actions are ambiguous again: it is possible that he was fulfilling a secret and sinister plan to sleep with the Step-Daughter, out of perversion and/or revenge, and it is also possible that he merely got unlucky. In short, it is impossible to distinguish his innocence or guilt, just as it is impossible to decide whether he or the Step-Daughter is telling the truth about whether they ultimately had sex in Pace's atelier.

The Father took the rest back as his family, but explains that they all continue to struggle with their conscience, which is the root of their drama. He argues that people have various consciences and personalities, and should not be judged by the thoughts and actions of their worst ones—which is what the Step-Daughter is doing to him.

Given the damage he had already caused by sleeping with (or almost sleeping with) his Step-Daughter, the Father's attempts to make amends by supporting his now destitute former family actually worsened the situation. His theory about the multiplicity of identity, which is effectively a way of questioning if there is one "real" self that can be opposed to "fake" or "illusory" selves, allows him to dodge culpability for his actions by claiming that he has changed or is more complex than his worst actions. But his family and the play that defines his being as a Character nevertheless fixate on this singular, most evil of his selves, thereby denying him the freedom to move on and remake himself.

The Father changes the subject to the Son, who insists he is not involved in the drama. The Step-Daughter declares that the Son thinks he is better than the rest of them, like a "fine gentleman" surrounded by "vulgar folk," and has mistreated and rejected them—including his own Mother—in the house they now share. In a refined and theatrical tone, the Son blames the Step-Daughter for brusquely dropping into his house, "treat[ing] his father in an equivocal and confidential manner," and demanding money. The Father thinks he owes it to the family, but the Son has never known this family and determines he would "rather not say what I feel and think about" their sudden return.

While the Step-Daughter and the Father drive the action (and the Boy and the Child never talk), the Son and the Mother actively resist the conversion of their collective agony into a public spectacle, perhaps much like the author who abandoned them all. If the play means overcoming the past for the Father and gaining revenge on the Father for the Step-Daughter, for the Son it means bringing undeserved public shame upon himself. In this sense, he points to the grotesque aspect of the theater, which invites the public to partake in stories of private suffering. While the Father seems to believe blood relatives owe one another support, the Son could not care less who does and does not share his parentage—rather, he looks at the rest as outsiders. (But the audience later learns that he has another reason for holding back.)

The Son tells the Manager he is "an 'unrealized' character, dramatically speaking." But the Father replies that the Son is in fact "the hinge of the whole action," pointing to his effect on the frightened Boy, whom the Father says reminds him of himself—but the Manager promises to "cut him out" because boys are "a nuisance […] on the stage." The Father promises that the Boy and the Child do not make it: when the family moves in together, the drama "ends with the death of the little girl, the tragedy of the boy and the flight of the elder daughter [Step-Daughter]," leaving only the Father, Mother, and Son. The "atmosphere of mortal desolation" they suffer is "the revenge […] of the Demon of Experiment." Without faith, the Father comments, people believe in their own versions of reality, lose their humility, and can no longer "create certain states of happiness."

In commenting on—and predicting—his own development as a character, the Son explicitly breaks the "fourth wall," showing the audience that the boundaries between the world of the play and the one outside it remain porous for Pirandello. The Father's response suggests that this lack of development in the Son's character adds yet another layer of distortion between the "real" events of the Characters' past and the versions they recount and act out for the Manager, Actors, and audience. Beyond making the same prediction about the end of the drama as the Step-Daughter did earlier in this section, the Father also completes the Son's earlier prediction that he would mention "the Demon of Experiment," a concept that remains ambiguous but that he links to the Characters' meaningless suffering, which cannot necessarily be blamed on one actor or act—one author, as it were.

The Manager admits that "there's the stuff for a drama in all this," and the Father promises that the Characters are "born for the stage [...] act[ing] that rôle for which we have been cast." The Manager offers to connect them with an author, but the Father insists the Manager is the author. The Manager says he has no experience, but the Father declares that the Manager need not write the drama out, but merely "take it down" as they "play it, scene by scene!" The Manager agrees and takes the six Characters offstage to his office. Meanwhile, the confused Actors decide that this must all be some kind of "madness" or "joke." They leave, and the **curtain** remains up for a 20-minute intermission.

Although just a few minutes before he insisted that the Characters were "mad" and could not possibly be fictional, now the Manager agrees to be the author—although he receives the story from outside himself, rather than conjuring it up from within. As he promises to turn the Characters' lives into a text during the next section of the play, Pirandello's Manager sets up a direct window into the process and failures of authorship. The intermission merges the time of the play (during which the Manager and Father deliberate) and that of the audience (who gets 20 minutes to make sense of what has happened so far).

ACT 2

After a bell resumes the action, the Step-Daughter declares that she is "not going to mix [her]self up in this mess" and runs onstage with the Child, who seems confused about where they are. "The stage," the Step-Daughter explains, is "where people play at being serious." She and the Child are in "a horrid comedy," where "it's all make-believe." But this can be better, like having "a make-believe fountain [rather] than a real one" for the Child. The Step-Daughter insists that the Mother does not love the Child because of the Boy, who has cautiously come out on stage. The Step-Daughter grabs him, notices a **revolver** in his pocket, and declares that he should kill the Father and/or the Son.

The Second Act abruptly begins with a series of metatheatrical references from the Step-Daughter. She brings up the title of the fictional Pirandello play from the First Act—"Mixing it Up"—and contrasts the "serious[ness]" of theater with the "comedy" of her life, but also implies that (by coming onstage) she and the Child are in a "make-believe" world rather than the a "real" one. Her reference to the fountain and the revolver in the Boy's pocket make no sense yet, but make it clear that something sinister is in the works. The Step-Daughter's extraordinary attention to the Child and disdain for her brother, the Boy, raises the question of whether the young Child might actually be the Step-Daughter's (and not the Mother's) daughter.

The Father and Manager walk onstage and tell the Step-Daughter that they are ready, and just need her for some final business. She reluctantly follows them inside, and the Son and Mother exit the office and come onstage. The Son laments that he "can't even get away" and refuses to acknowledge the Mother, who complains that her "punishment [is] the worst of all" and calls her Son "so cruel." Facing the other way, the Son laments the Father's insistence that their drama can become a play: the Father seems to believe "he has got the meaning of it all," and that what happened revealed a side of himself that was supposed to be private. But the Son declares that he has been forced to publicly reveal his parents' shameful selfishness and failure to truly fulfill the roles of "father and mother."

The Son's sense of entrapment in the Father's self-serving public spectacle suggests a parallel between Characters' entrapment in a story and Actors' entrapment in a script, on the one hand, and individuals' entrapment in the world and powerlessness before their fates, on the other. It becomes clear that the Son cares about the family violating normative roles and scripts insofar as it affects public appearances and others' attitudes toward him, while he does not much care about if his parents actually fulfill their supposed roles. Indeed, he actively refuses to engage with them, which is a central reason for the Mother's continued agony. In caring more about the appearance of a normal family than actually having one, the Son reveals the way that (for Pirandello) these appearances and expectations are deceptive.

Everyone comes back on stage—the Actors, Property Man, Prompter, Father, Step-Daughter, and the Manager, who tells the Machinist to prepare "floral decorations" and the Property Man to find the yellow sofa (which does not exist). Against the Step-Daughter's protests, the Manager agrees to use the green sofa. He calls for a "shop window—long and narrowish" and a small table. The Father asks for a mirror and the Step-Daughter for a screen. The Manager sends the Property Man to find all of the above items, plus "some clothes pegs."

By showing how the Manager and Characters negotiate to create a more-or-less realistic set for the scene they are about to reenact, Pirandello again highlights the backstage trickery that is necessary for the stage to produce its magic. The Step-Daughter's insistence on finding the right furniture suggests that she is committed to strictly representing the reality of her experience, or else trying to wrest control of the narrative from the Father and the Manager (which she fails to do). The decorations she and the Father request—the mirror and screen—both overtly refer to vision, perspective, and identity. The mirror points to how the Characters gain a kind of self-awareness by putting on their show in front of the public and how the Actors and Manager see their own profession reflected in the Characters. The screen points to how the Step-Daughter's identity is hidden from the Father during their hidden sexual encounter.

The Manager sits the Prompter down with "an outline of the scenes, act by act," and asks him to bring paper and take down the action that is about to unfold in shorthand. He tells the Actors to clear the stage and "watch and listen" what transpires among the Characters, and wait to be given their parts. The Father is confused about the Manager's plan, which is to have the Characters rehearse for the Actors, since "the characters don't act" but are "in the 'book' […] when there is a 'book'!" The Father protests that "the actors aren't the characters," and are in fact lucky enough to "have us [the Characters] alive before them." The Manager asks if the Characters will "come before the public yourselves," which would be "a magnificent spectacle," but declares that they should not "pretend that [they] can act."

The Prompter's usual role is inverted: he goes from reading the script to writing it, just as the Manager transforms from director to audience. The Manager's insistence that the Actors play the Characters points to the contradiction at the heart of the theater, a profession that believes truth is better reached through reenactments and distortions of reality than through reality itself. Now, with the Characters immediately available and able to author their own story, the tables are turned and acting becomes no longer necessary. But this kind of direct truth is incompatible with the Manager's job.

The Manager begins giving out the parts: the Second Lady Lead will be the Mother—her name is Amalia, the Father explains, but the Manager says they "don't want to call her by her real name," and the Father grows "more and more confused" before saying that his "own words sound false" to him. The Manager agrees to call the Mother "Amalia." He has the Juvenile Lead play the Son and, "naturally," the Leading Lady play the Step-Daughter, who bursts out in laughter and, offending the others, declare that she "can't see [herself] at all in you [the Leading Lady]." The Father agrees, implying that the actors do not share "our temperaments, our souls," but the Manager rejects the idea that "the spirit of the piece is in you [the Characters]." The Actors will "give body and form" to their "soul[s] or whatever you like to call it."

The Father's loss of confidence in the meaning of his own words points explicitly to how the Characters' arrival confuses fiction and reality for everyone (but perhaps most of all the audience). Although earlier the Manager appeared as the defender of "reality" against the Characters' bizarre fiction, now the Father champions "reality": that of his and his family's real lives over the distortions the Manager is planning for the stage. This question is left unresolved: it is unclear if actors need to share characters' "temperaments [and] souls," and there is no way for the audience (or the Manager or his Actors) to ever access the real "reality" behind the Characters' experience. Rather, just as the Characters are themselves played by actors on stage, the story is only communicated through layers of testimony and retelling. As the story is contested by all the Characters, it is up to the audience to decide whom to trust.

The Father continues to protest, declaring that the Actors do not represent them. The Manager promises that "the make-up will remedy all that" and explains that "on the stage, you as yourself, cannot exist." The Father complies: the Characters' author "didn't want to put us on the stage," he admits, but he does not know who should play him. The Leading Man interrupts that it should be him, but he and the Father agree that "it will be difficult" for the Leading Man's performance to resemble what the Father says he "inside of [him]self feel[s] [him]self to be."

Bringing up the will of the Characters' author, the Father at once recognizes and throws out the ordinary theory that an author controls the meaning of the stories they write. The Manager's comments show how in stories—whether on the page or on the stage—Characters' fundamental identities are disguised and only ever revealed partially. The point of literature and performance is not to directly state what characters "feel [themselves] to be," but rather to offer a window into their identities through their actions, decisions, and interactions. The Father openly defies this norm by insisting on defining himself and his story.

The Manager cuts off the subject and asks the Step-Daughter if the scene of Madame Pace's atelier is right. The Step-Daughter "do[es]n't recognize the scene" but the Father agrees it is close enough. The Manager sends the Property Man to find an envelope to give to the Father.

Although the Father's objection is never resolved, the Manager steps in to do what he does best: to continue moving the performance forward and decide when the Characters' and Actors' feelings are and are not worth the time and energy. In other words, he balances out the action onstage, and partially obscures the Characters' true identities in the process.

The Manager declares it is time for the "First scene—the Young Lady." The Leading Lady volunteers herself, but the Manager means the Step-Daughter, who prepares to act out the scene. He realizes Madame Pace is not present, and asks "what the devil's to be done" about her absence.

It becomes clear that the Manager is preparing to stage the encounter between the Father and Step-Daughter, adding another metatheatrical layer by having the Characters from the story-within-a-play stage a performance of their own past (a play-within-a-theater-within-a-play).

The Father interrupts and asks for the Actresses' hats and one of their mantles, which he hangs on the pegs that have been put up on the stage. He declares that, "by arranging the stage for her," they can make Madame Pace appear—and she does. The "fat, oldish" Madame Pace walks down from the theater's entrance, made-up and "dressed with a comical elegance in black silk." The Step-Daughter declares that it is really her, the Father proudly agrees, and the Manager and Actors are first surprised and then offended by the Characters' "vulgar trick." The Father yells over them, asking why they prefer their "vulgar, commonplace sense of truth" over "this reality which comes to birth attracted and formed by the magic of the stage itself," and which is "much truer than" all the actors anyway. Whoever acts out Madame Pace will be "less true than" the real Madame Pace.

Madame Pace's inexplicable appearance defies all the laws of storytelling, which is the point: indeed, her appearance is Pirandello's way of pointing out that the theater is founded on illusions. The Actors are offended because they work so hard to make stories come to life, when the Characters do it so easily. The Father also curiously points out that "the magic of the stage" is more real than the actors who create it, a sum greater than its parts or a truth expressed by means of illusion. At the same time as the Father lampoons the Actors for being mere imitators, Madame Pace herself looks like a caricature of a madam (brothel manager), so concerned with her appearance and dedicated to "elegance" that she appears "comical." And by calling her into existence, the Father proves his capacity to act as an author, creating something out of nothing.

The Father announces that it is finally time for "the scene" to begin, but the stage directions note that "the scene between the Step-Daughter and Madame Pace has already begun [...] in a manner impossible for the stage," with Madame Pace holding the Step-Daughter's chin and muttering quietly. This arouses the Actors' ire, but the Step-Daughter tells them that "these aren't matters which can be shouted." The Manager asks them "to pretend to be alone" but the Step-Daughter wags her finger at him, warning that "someone" cannot hear Madame Pace's words.

Just as soon as he has authored Madame Pace's existence, the Father loses authorial control—and as soon as she has been conjured for the stage, Madame Pace violates its rules, acting "impossibl[y]" by insisting on privacy, talking so quietly that she cannot be heard by the audience (who never learns what she and the Step-Daughter are actually saying).

The Father explains that he is this "someone," and that he has to wait outside. The Manager rejects this as against "the conventions of the theatre," which requires "the scene between [the Step-Daughter] and [Madame Pace]" first. The Step-Daughter hastily explains that Madame Pace has been complaining about the Mother's repairs to the Step-Daughter's dress and explaining "that if I want her to continue to help us in our misery I must be patient."

The Manager struggles to square the Characters' desire for privacy with the theater's demand to make everything public—even though the Step-Daughter is in fact trying to bring the scene closer to the reality of what took place between her, Madame Pace, and the Father.

In broken English—"half Italian, half Spanish" in the original Italian script but "half English, half Italian" here—Madame Pace declares she "no wanta take advantage of" the Step-Daughter, who begins laughing along with the actors at Pace's "most comical" accent. Pace protests that she "trya best speaka English" and the Manager agrees to let her continue, which will "put a little comic relief into the crudity of the situation." The Step-Daughter agrees: Pace's commands feel like jokes, like when she asks the Step-Daughter to meet "an 'old signore.'"

Madame Pace's manipulative exploitation of the Mother and Step-Daughter contrasts with her "most comical" accent, which offers "a little comic relief" in Six Characters in Search of an Author *as well as the future play the Manager is planning. Nevertheless, this is an utterly inappropriate and borderline cruel time for comic relief, because it is precisely when the audience is about to watch the horrific incest between the Father and Step-Daughter, which they already know brings the family together by destroying all of their lives in unison.*

Suddenly, the furious Mother lunges at Madame Pace—the Actors restrain her while she calls Pace an "old devil" and "murderess!" The Father and Step-Daughter try to calm the Mother down and protest that she and Madame Pace cannot be in the same room. The Manager says it "doesn't matter" because they are just "sketch[ing]" the scene. He sits the Mother down, and the Step-Daughter and Madame Pace continue their conversation. Madame Pace refuses to "do anything witha your mother present" but the Step-Daughter insists on meeting "this 'old signore' who wants to talk nicely to me." She sends Madame Pace away—Pace walks offstage "furious"—and directs the Father to make his entry and say "'Good morning, Miss' in that peculiar tone, that special tone..." The Manager protests that the Step-Daughter is usurping his role, but orders the Father to do what she asked.

Although the Characters are supposedly only reenacting previous events, the Mother reacts to Madame Pace with an understandable rage—in fact, it seems that actors are better suited for the theater because they lack *the emotions of real characters, not because they can better embody them. (The Characters' emotions lead them to pursue personal agendas over the collective task of their performance, which they frequently throw off-track as a result.) For the Manager and the Actors, then, the Characters are only offering a "sketch" of his play-in-the-making, while for the Characters this "sketch" means reliving their trauma (and for the audience it means looking behind rather than ahead, getting a "sketch" of the Characters' backstory).*

The Father begins acting his part, approaching the Step-Daughter, who hides her face behind her hat. He asks if she has "been here before" (she has), and then if he can remove her hat (she does herself). Meanwhile, the Mother watches "with varying expressions of sorrow, indignation, anxiety, and horror," sometimes crying into her hands and yelling "my God!" The Father offers the Step-Daughter "a smarter hat" from among the Actors' hats (one of them protests, but the Manager shuts her down and orders the action to resume). The Step-Daughter refuses the hat but the Father insists—she gestures to her black dress and he realizes that she is "in mourning." He apologizes but she tells him not to.

The audience can't experience this excruciating scene as fresh or suspenseful, given the information they already have from the Father and the Step-Daughter, as well as the Mother's extreme reactions. Indeed, while the Mother's reactions give life to the emotional toll of the Father and Step-Daughter's sexual encounter, the Father and Step-Daughter themselves seem emotionless, having clearly lost the sexual interest and sense of mourning (respectively) that they are trying to reenact. This suggests that perhaps the Actors really could do better at making the scene come to life in a way that shows the audience its future emotional toll on the family.

The Manager interrupts the Step-Daughter and Father, telling the Prompter to "cut out that last bit" and stopping the action. Although the Step-Daughter protests that "the best's coming now," the Manager asks the Leading Man and Leading Lady to re-enact the scene so far, which they begin to do, although the stage-directions note that the reenactment is "quite a different thing, though it has not in any way the air of a parody." When the Leading Man enters, the Father yells "No! no!" and the Step-Daughter erupts in laughter. They both complain about "the manner, the tone."

The Manager's intervention further spoils the scene for the audience, and the Leading Lady and Leading Man's reenactment both forces the Characters to hold a mirror to their own actions and directly shows how the stage distorts reality. The Father cuts off the Actors just as the Manager cuts off the Characters, which furthers the parallels between these two figures (who act as, in a way, the primary "authors" of the Characters' story throughout the play).

The Manager restarts the scene and directs the Leading Lady and Leading Man on how to act out the first encounter between the Father and the Step-Daughter, who laughs from the sidelines the whole way through. This infuriates the Leading Lady and Leading Man, and the Manager yells at the apologetic Step-Daughter, insisting that she doesn't have "any manners" and is "absolutely disgusting." The Father interjects, defending the Step-Daughter by repeating that the actors "are certainly not us."

Playing the same role, the Step-Daughter and the Leading Lady clash over which of them embodies it legitimately. Interestingly, while the Step-Daughter's frustrations are based on the Leading Lady's acting, the Leading Lady complains about the Step-Daughter's inability to behave herself like a proper audience member. The Step-Daughter denies the Leading Lady legitimate access to the truth, while the Leading Lady denies the Step-Daughter legitimate access to the theater.

The Manager again tries to continue the action, declaring that he "could never stand rehearsing with the author present," because "he's never satisfied!" The Step-Daughter promises to stop laughing. The Manager asks the Leading Man to tell the Leading Lady (playing the Step-Daughter) that he "understand[s]" her mourning and ask whom she is mourning for, but the Step-Daughter interrupts to declare that what *really* happened was the Father told her to "take off this little frock." The Manager declares that this would "make a riot in the theatre!" but the Step-Daughter protests that "it's the truth!" The Manager explains that this does not matter: for the theater, "truth up to a certain point, but no further."

The Manager's comment about the author—who is considered, in the time and place of this play, to be always a "he"—points to the interpretive work of the stage, which never simply reflects a written "story" but always modifies and translates it to a particular performance context. This is not proof that actors do not do justice to a work, but rather that a work is not bound to the wishes and desires of its author—just as the Characters, to their dismay, find their story neither told nor interpreted the way they want it to be. Given the Father's persistent philosophizing, it is reasonable to think this also extends to the way people can never control the consequences of their actions in general. Beyond questioning the truth of the stage, here Pirandello questions the value of truth in the first place—and also gestures to the way social norms constrain and inform what he is capable of revealing in his plays (here, the level of detail he can show about the Father and Step-Daughter's relationship).

The furious Step-Daughter declares that she refuses to let the Manager "piece together a little romantic sentimental scene out of [her] disgust" by letting the Leading Lady explain that her (the Step-Daughter's) father (the Clerk) just died. Rather, the Leading Lady must do what she really did: take the Father "behind that screen, and with these fingers tingling with shame…"

The Father, Step-Daughter, and Manager all fight to determine the meaning of their story: the Father wants to appear as sympathetic as possible and make a public apology (or series of excuses), the Step-Daughter wants to expose the Father's horrific behavior and her own resultant trauma, and the Manager simply wants the story to be riveting and scandalous—but not so scandalous as to break social norms—so that people will buy theater tickets.

The Manager interrupts again, explaining that "you can't have this kind of thing on the stage," even if it is true. The Step-Daughter threatens to leave and accuses the Manager of having "fixed it all up" with the Father, so that the Father's "cerebral drama" gets to play itself out, but not the Step-Daughter's part. The Manager protests that this risks the Step-Daughter's character "becoming too prominent and overshadowing all the others." Rather, the play must "pack them all into a neat little framework and then act what is actable." It must "hint at the unrevealed interior life of each" character, instead of having them each "tell the public all [their] troubles in a nice monologue or a regular one hour lecture." The Manager threatens that the Step-Daughter might "make a bad impression," having "confessed to me that there were others before him at Madame Pace's."

Now, the Father, Step-Daughter, and Manager make their conflict over authorship explicit and the Manager explains why stories must gesture at rather than directly express the truths they hope to get across—as an author, he rejects truth for the sake of balance. Yet despite claiming to occupy a neutral position, the Manager also seems to defend the Father, especially when he threatens to retaliate against the Step-Daughter for her apparent moral deficits (even though she was cheated into being a prostitute and took the work to provide for her family). This supports the Step-Daughter's suspicions that the Father and Manager are working together, using theater to hide the truth about and make excuses for the Father's actions.

The Step-Daughter declares that "he who was responsible for the first fault is responsible for all that follow" which means all of her faults are the Father's responsibility. She declares that, on the stage, the Father's character cannot face his "noble remorses" unless he sleeps with the Step-Daughter and asks her the question that he really asked her while lying in her arms. The Mother "breaks out into a fit of crying" for a long time.

The Step-Daughter points out the ironic contradiction in the Father's attempt to make amends by publicly re-committing his crime. At the same time, she clearly goes too far by blaming him for "all [the faults] that follow[ed]" his crime—although she might also be making a veiled reference to an earlier, incestuous crime that set their relationship in motion.

After the pause, the Step-Daughter asks the Manager if he wants to see what really happened. He says he does, and the Step-Daughter tells him to "ask that Mother there to leave us." The Mother yells out, "No! No! Don't permit it, sir, don't permit it!" and explains that she "can't bear it." The Manager protests that the crucial moment "has happened already," but the Mother declares that "it's taking place now. It happens all the time." And this, she explains, is why the two children (the Boy and the Child) do not talk—they cannot, and "they cling to me to keep my torment actual and vivid for me." They have ceased to exist, she insists, and the Step-Daughter "has run away, and has left me, and is lost."

Again, the Mother reacts to the Father and Step-Daughter as though they are really doing what they profess to be only re-enacting, and the lines between reality and performance grow even blurrier. While the Manager thinks in terms of his narrative, in which the climax "has happened already," the Mother remains firmly rooted in her lived reality and cannot separate the Father and Step-Daughter's "acting" from their real actions. Disturbingly, her exasperated declaration that "it happens all the time" suggests that the Father and Step-Daughter's sexual relationship might not have ended with this initial encounter, which means that they are both lying throughout the play (and, indeed, might be intentionally working together and casting blame on each other to distract from their ongoing relationship). The Mother comments on the dramatic function of the Boy and Child, whose muteness reflects the way they are denied identity by the Father and Step-Daughter's dominating role in the drama and violation of the foundational family taboo (as well as by the deaths that the other Characters have already predicted).

The Father announces that it is time for the Step-Daughter to castigate him "for that one fleeting and shameful moment of my life"—the Manager agrees, declaring that this event will be "the nucleus of the whole first act," until the scene in which the Mother discovers what happened. The Father remarks that the Mother's "final cry" is his "punishment," and the Step-Daughter insists that "it's driven men mad, that cry!" She remembers leaning on the Father's chest, noticing one of the veins in her arm, feeling disgusted, and "let[ting her] head sink on his breast." She acts this out and yells at the Mother to "Cry out as you did then!" The Mother pulls the Step-Daughter off the Father and calls the Manager a "brute!"

The Father seems to believe the play will give him the opportunity to perform remorse (even though he does not seem to actually feel it, but rather only rationalizes and excuses his errors away). In fact, this never happens: instead, he and the Step-Daughter merely show off their incestuous relationship even more grotesquely. The Father interprets the Mother's pain as his own, and both re-traumatizes her and fails to recognize how he is again making her suffer for his own personal gain. For the Manager, too, the Mother's suffering is a mere plot device—caught up in the illusions of the stage, everyone seems unable to see the Mother's real agony.

Pleased, the Manager calls the scene "damned good" and declares "**curtain** here, curtain," meaning that he would stop the action in his play at this point. The Machinist is confused and actually lowers the stage curtain, which covers everyone except the Manager and Father. The Manager comments that the Machinist is a "darned idiot" and explains the man's mistake to the Father and the audience, before noting that at least he has found "the right ending" for the First Act of his play.

For the first time the curtain falls, although it is emptied of its usual meaning—there is no break in the action or real transition in the play's theme, unlike between the First and Second Acts. The Machinist's error again collapses the different layers of drama into one: the Characters' play-within-a-play, the future play-within-a-play that the Manager is planning, and the play that the audience is watching all merge for a moment, with the Manager's imagination suddenly slipping out of his control and transforming into reality.

ACT 3

The **curtain** goes back up and reveals a changed stage, with "a drop, with some trees, and one or two wings" at the back and "a portion of a fountain basin." The Characters are seated on the right side: the Mother is with the Boy and the Child, the surly Son avoids the others and looks "bored, angry, and full of shame," and the Father and Step-Daughter are in front. The Actors are on the left side, also seated, and the Manager "is standing up in the middle of the stage, with his hand closed over his mouth in the act of meditating."

Although very little time has passed between the end of the last Act and the beginning of this one, suddenly the play shifts into a more self-consciously theatrical tone, with the arrangement of people staging a symbolic conflict between the Characters and the Actors seeking to represent them, with the conflict and action balanced by the Manager. It is unclear whether the stage decorations are integral to the plot or simply red herrings—the Step-Daughter mentioned a fountain at the beginning of Act Two, but still has not given any context.

The Manager declares it is time to plan "the second act!" and promises "it'll go fine!" The Step-Daughter explains that they will cover the family moving back into the Father's house, despite the Son's objections—and her own. The Mother declares that this was for the better, and that she "did try in every way…" The Step-Daughter interrupts—the Mother tried "to dissuade [her] from spiting [the Father]," but she continues to hate him and "enjoy[s] it immensely."

The Mother's brief line gives the audience some insight into her mindset and (given her distress at watching the Father and Step-Daughter together) her level of desperation when they decided to move in with the Father. It becomes clear that this recent move only gave the family time and space for their conflicts to fester—leading them ultimately to seek resolution, catharsis, and justice through the stage.

The Step-Daughter agrees to stop talking, after one final comment: the Second Act cannot all be set in the garden, for the Son "is always shut up alone in his room" and the scene about the Boy "takes place indoors." The Manager complains that this many scene changes would be impossible, but the Leading Man suggests one scene change (like "they used to" do), and the Leading Lady says "it makes the illusion easier." This offends the Father, who objects to the word "illusion." He says the word "is particularly painful," it is "cruel, really cruel," and the Manager "ought to understand." The Manager and Leading Man clarify that they are talking about "the illusion of a reality" that acting creates.

The Step-Daughter again tries to take authorial control over the Manager's play to ensure it resembles the reality of the family's past events as closely as possible. The Manager's response comments on the play the audience is watching as much as the play he is planning—in both of them, which are now increasingly indistinguishable, the action must be condensed because of the theater's practical constraints as a storytelling method. The Father's objection to the term "illusion" both reaffirms his insistence that the Characters (more so than the Actors) really exist and foreshadows the way illusion and reality get completely "mixed up" with one another in the rest of this scene.

The Father apologizes and remarks that this is merely "a kind of game" for the Manager and Actors. The Leading Lady is offended: "we are serious actors," she objects. The Father explains that he is talking about "the game, or play, of your art, which has to give […] a perfect illusion of reality." The Manager is satisfied with this explanation, but the Father declares that he and the five other Characters "have no other reality outside of this illusion." The Manager and Actors are surprised. The Father continues: "that which is a game of art for you is our sole reality." And "not only for us," but (he implies) also for the Actors. He asks the Manager who he is—the Manager, "perplexed, half smiling," says that he is himself, and the Father wonders if "that isn't true, because you are I…?"

Again, the two mirrored sets of players, the Characters standing on the right half of the stage and the Actors on the left, mutually insist on their own realness and deny that of their counterparts. These parallels get tighter throughout the play: here, the Father insults the Leading Lady by miscommunicating precisely the same idea that the Manager has just miscommunicated to him. Asking the Manager about his identity, the Father furthers the parallel between them—as the play's two authorial figures, they both represent different parts of Pirandello and different forces inherent in any process of authorship (with the Father as the impulse to explain, elaborate, and divulge, and the Manager as the streamlining process that prevents characters and storylines from falling out of balance).

The Manager laughs and calls the Father mad. The Father agrees, "because we are all making believe here." "Only for a joke" can the Leading Man play the Father, who is really himself. The Father declares he has "caught you in a trap!" The Manager asks if they have to go through this whole conversation again, but the Father says no—rather, he tells the Manager "to abandon this game of art" and "seriously" ask himself the question: "who are you?" The Manager declares that the Father has "a nerve"—he "calls himself a character […] and asks me who I am!" The Father replies that "a character, sir, may always ask a man who he is." A character has "especial characteristics," and so "is always 'somebody.'" "A man," conversely, "may very well be 'nobody.'"

The professional actors playing Pirandello's script onstage again publicly ridicule their own profession and, speaking both on the level of the play-within-the-play and directly to the audience, insist that people "seriously" confront the fundamental emptiness of human identity and existence. Characters' confinement to art is also what gives them identity—whereas people themselves can be many things, including many characters, and therefore lack an essence. This relates to the reputation of actors as unknowable and potentially deceitful people, with no core identity (which allows them to easily take on so many others onstage). But the Father is arguing that everyone is constantly acting and only ever pretending to have a real "self."

The Manager declares that he is *the manager* and should not be questioned, but the Father continues: he wants to know if the Manager can see his past self, "with all the illusions that were yours then […] that mean nothing to you now." Does the Manager "feel that […] the very earth under [his] feet is sinking away" when realizing that who he is today will "seem a mere illusion to you tomorrow?" The Manager asks what the point of this is, and the Father explains that the Characters admit they "have no other reality beyond the illusion," while the Manager does not see that today's reality will "prove an illusion for [him] tomorrow."

Lacking thoughtful responses to the Father's probing questions, the Manager simply tries to close the matter by asserting his authority—but, for the first time, his authority (the basis of his job and identity) begins "sinking away." It is usurped by the Father, who at once tells and demonstrates for the Manager that human identity is more of an "illusion" than that of characters. Essentially, he raises the classic philosophical question of personal identity through time: people constantly change, and because they are not the same from one day to the next, how can they insist they are the same people throughout their lives—or, even more obstinately, that they have specific defining characteristics that are inherent to their identities?

The Manager jokes that the Father will next declare his "comedy" to be "truer and more real than I am," and the Father agrees, declaring that he "thought you'd understand that from the beginning." The Manager's reality changes, he says, but the Characters' does not. The Characters' reality "is already fixed for ever," the Father says, which is "terrible" and "should make you shudder" because it should make the Manager realize that his "reality is a mere transitory and fleeting illusion," changing based on his emotions and intellect. People receive "illusions of reality" in the "fatuous comedy of life," which cannot end, or else "all would be finished." The Manager pleads that the Father "*at least* finish with this philosophizing" and get back to the play.

Just as the Manager's reality is the Father's illusion and vice versa, the Manager's joke is the Father's serious belief. Rather than arguing that Characters are better or more fortunate than normal people because they have identities and lack mortal bodies, the Father actually sees it as a kind of eternal condemnation, a life sentence in the prison of an author or character's own making. (The Father, specifically, will be eternally bound to remember and cope with his own moral errors.) However, the Father also thinks that normal people are no better off because they have to deal with being, at core, nothingness. If people are constantly performing their identities and "selves" in the "fatuous comedy of life," then the Father is not ultimately arguing that fiction is better or worse, more or less genuine than reality: rather, he is arguing that the two cannot be clearly separated.

The Manager looks the Father up and down and recalls that the Father declared himself "a 'character,' created by an author who did not afterward care to make a drama of his own creations." The Father replies that this is true, but the Manager calls it "nonsense" that "none of us believes" and the Father cannot even "believe seriously." In fact, this "nonsense" reminds the Manager of "a certain author" his company had just begun rehearsing.

The Manager implies as clearly as possible that the Father is a foil for Pirandello, the original author who abandoned the Characters (but has nevertheless made an eternal imprint of them, and has brought them to life precisely by letting them lament their own abandonment). While it may go too far to say the Father's beliefs about reality and illusion are all Pirandello's own, there is a clear overlap between the Father and the play's refusal to draw a firm line between reality and illusion, and it is interesting to consider the many parallels between the Father's life and Pirandello's own. (Most notably, just as the Father sent the Mother away years before because their temperaments were unmatched, Pirandello sent his mentally ill wife—who could not distinguish between reality and fantasy—to a mental asylum a few years before writing this play.)

The Father does not know who this author is, but says he is expressing his own feelings and "philosophizing only for those who do not think what they feel" and "blind themselves with their own sentiment." He considers this inhuman, because (for him) humans are special in their capacity to analyze and think rationally about their suffering. He is "not philosophizing," he promises the Manager, but "crying aloud the reason of my sufferings."

The Father's reference to "those who do not think what they can feel" recalls the very beginning of the play, when the Manager tells the Leading Man that his husband role represents the intellect, and the Leading Lady that, as the wife, she represents nature. The Father and Mother clearly fit this bill, which further supports the theory that the Characters are actually performing—or rehearsing—"Mixing it Up" all along. While the others see him *as inhuman because he philosophizes instead of genuinely facing the consequences of his actions, the Father seems to consider the Mother inhuman because she is dominated by feeling. They, too, are irreconcilable mirrors of each other. The Manager calls the Father's monologues "philosophizing" because (as the Father admitted in the First Act) they serve no purpose except self-gratification and distraction, whereas the Father thinks that he is somehow making amends by speaking. His coping mechanism suggests another interesting reading of this play: as a study of how men use intellect (the Father), power (the Manager), and the respect they demand to cover up and distract from their abusive behavior.*


The Manager asks if any other character has ever left its role to monologue like the Father—the Father promises that this has never happened "because authors, as a rule, hide the labour of their creations." Authors make their characters independent and follow them as they go—this is why people can imagine what characters would do out of context, in situations they never face in the works they inhabit.

Pirandello expressly breaks the rule of the theater, repeatedly reaching out to show "the labor of [his] creations" and the backstage labor that makes theater possible. As though to taunt his critics, he has the Father explicitly point this out here, breaking conventions precisely by directly saying that he breaks conventions. Ironically, Pirandello also speaks directly through the Father in order to argue that authors lose control of their characters—which is, of course, how the Characters ended up in the theater.


This is also the curse of the play's Characters, the Father explains: they are "born of an author's fantasy" but "denied life by him." They have all tried to make the Manager "give them their stage life"—the Step-Daughter agrees, explaining how she and the other Characters often "sought to tempt" the Manager in his room at night. The Father suggests her attempts might have been "too insistent, too troublesome," but the Step-Daughter blames the Manager who "made [her] so himself" but "abandoned us [Characters] in a fit of depression, of disgust for the ordinary theatre." The Father suggests the Manager "modify" the Step-Daughter and Son, who "do too much" and "won't do anything at all," respectively.

Although the Manager has just accused the Father of being Pirandello, the Characters now call the Manager their author, not only the gatekeeper to their "stage life" but also, apparently, the original author who abandoned them. Since the Father, Step-Daughter, and Manager all represent different authorial impulses (the Father the impulse to explain, the Step-Daughter the impulse to shock, and the Manager the impulse to preserve order), it is also possible to read this entire play as the internal monologue of an author struggling with the process of composition. Rather than try to resolve these forces into a balanced work, Pirandello exacerbates each of them to shed light on their conflict.

The Manager protests that the Father, too, does too much: he is always "trying to make us believe you are a character" by philosophizing. The Father protests that he is only "representing the torment of [his] spirit," and trying "to give [his life] a meaning and a value" like any other human being. This is why he refuses to agree with the Step-Daughter's picture of things—it is his "raison d'être." But he agrees to adapt to "the parts you [the Manager] assign us," and the Manager explains that he simply "can't go on arguing" because "drama is action, sir, and not confounded philosophy."

The Father violates the primary rule of writing that most students learn in primary school: instead of showing, he tells. Of course, philosophy is supposed to do the opposite and speak directly. The Father's argument about the value of philosophy shows directly why this play is often considered a foundational text or precursor to existentialism: the Father sees that philosophy is an attempt to make meaning out of meaninglessness, but also that he has no choice but to engage in it, lest he submit and allow himself to suffer meaninglessly (like the Mother).

The Step-Daughter suggests that, with all the scene changes that would be required, there is in fact "too much action" planned for the drama. But the Manager explains that they have to "combine and group up all the facts in one simultaneous, close-kinit, action," rather than have the Boy "wandering like a ghost from room to room" and the Child "playing in the garden," as the Step-Daughter wants. (The Child must play "in the sun," the Step-Daughter insists—she loves watching the Child being "happy and careless" after having to sleep next to her own "vile contaminated body.")

The Manager shows again how the theater portrays truth by distorting reality: it turns the messiness of life and subjective experience into cleanly-packaged stories digestible from an external perspective that is never available in day-to-day life. For the first time in the play, the Child and Boy act—but it is altogether unclear what for. The Step-Daughter's affection for the Child again calls into question whose child the little girl really is, and the Step-Daughter directly cites the stain of taboo and illegitimacy when she says that she has been "vile[ly] contaminated" by her relationship with the Father.

The Manager agrees to have the last scene in this garden, turns around, and realizes that the stage is already set. He calls over the silent Boy and coaches him on how to act "as if you were looking for someone." He asks the Step-Daughter if he can give the Boy a line, but she says he will not speak—unless the Son leaves. Delighted, the Son begins to walk off, but the Manager blocks him on his way out, and the Mom raises her arms, "alarmed and terrified at the thought that [the Son] is really about to go away." The Son insists he has "nothing to do with this affair," but the Step-Daughter and Father insist he will stay to "act the terrible scene in the garden with his mother." The Son refuses: "I shall act nothing at all."

At once, after a long deliberation, the authors of the play—the Father and Step-Daughter who both try to determine its meaning, and the Manager who sets it in motion—find that, completely unbeknownst to them, the scene has set itself. The play hurls forward with no clear author. The Son's refusal to act sets in stone his status as an "unrealized character"—the audience never learns if he played a part in the coming "terrible" scene or if this scene is in fact the reason for his refusal to honor the spectacle of the theater to begin with.

The Step-Daughter tests the Son: she gets the Manager to stop blocking his way and tells him he is free to go. But he does not, and she insists that "he is obliged to stay here, indissolubly bound to the chain." In fact, even *she* will leave when it is time—but it is not yet. The Mother approaches the Son, and the Step-Daughter comments that the Mother is doing this despite "how little she wants to show these actors of yours what she really feels." The Mother "opens her arms" but the Son insists he "can't go away" and will "act nothing!" The Father tells the Manager that he can force the Son to act, and the Step-Daughter brings the Child to the fountain.

The Son, fully aware that he is in a play, sees that his own will can only go so far—he is ultimately bound to his fate and the unhappy family that has imposed itself on him. He and the Mother are not acting at all—although she does not even seem to understand or respond to the context of the stage, but merely acts out the affection and concern for her children that would likely guide her behavior in any context. The Son's dilemma also takes on a double meaning: he and the Father are not only arguing over acting on a stage, but also acting as in implementing a decision, taking a step forward, and overcoming resistance and uncertainty. The Son is not only being compelled to act in a performance; he is also being forced to fulfill the collective family fate that he did not choose but cannot avoid.

The Manager cryptically agrees that "both [should happen] at the same time." (Meanwhile, the Second Lady Lead and Juvenile Lead watch the Mother and Son, who are their assigned characters, respectively.) The Son asks the Manager what he means and insists that he shared "no scene" with the Mother, who disagrees: this scene happened in the Son's room (*not* in the garden, the Son notes). They notice the Actors watching and imitating them, and the Son declares that it is impossible "to live in front of a mirror" like this. The Manager agrees and sends the Actors away.

The Manager's strange direction reminds the audience that everyone already knows what is about to happen. While the Mother and Son treat their time onstage as a reality, the Actors continue thinking of it as a script. The Son's exasperation about "liv[ing] in front of a mirror" points to the double consciousness required in the theater, where actors are both the subject controlling the narratives and the objects under control, both author and material. This recalls not only the Father and Step-Daughter's multiple roles, but also the Manager's line to the Leading Man at the very start of the play, while rehearsing "Mixing it Up": he is to "become the puppet of [him]self."

Next, the Manager asks the Mother what happened in the Son's room. "Nothing happened!" insists the Son, but the Manager wants it acted out. The Mother agrees and the Father violently insists that the Son comply, but the distraught Son demands they stop, "or else…" The Son asks what the Father's "madness" means, and why he "insist[s] on showing everyone our shame." "Stand[ing] in for the will of our author," the Son refuses to stage the story, which was all the Father's idea from the beginning. In fact, the Son insists, the Father has narrated "things that have never happened at all." The Manager asks what actually did transpire.

The Son's final stand is both a success and a failure: he successfully refuses to participate and show the world his experience of events, but he fails to stop the show altogether. Just before the final climax, he again calls attention to the unreliability of all the Characters as narrators, not to mention the Manager who liberally adapts their story for the stage. While they all give competing versions, the Son insists on leaving a blank for the reader or audience to fill in and defends the author for trying to put a stop to the Characters' drama. With this, he turns into the play's final author figure: like the author who abandoned the Characters, the Son is about to have his will overruled.

The Son explains that he silently left his room and went to the garden. He trails off "with [an] expression of gloom" and the Manager pushes him. He declares that what happened was "horrible." Crying, the Mother glances toward the fountain, and the Manager realizes: the Child has drowned in the fountain. The Son tries to save her but is terrified to see the Boy "standing stock still, with eyes like a madman's."

The meaning of the Son's silence has completely transformed: it is now clear that he refused to speak because he did not want to publicly reenact this horrible trauma. He was silent because of his pain, not his hatred for or indifference toward the other Characters. The Boy's "madman" glare suggests he may have had something to do with the Child's death, but this question is never resolved.

Suddenly, there is a **revolver** shot from behind the trees onstage, and all the Characters and Actors cry out and run behind them. The Mother cries for help and the Actors bring the Boy's body to the stage. Some think he is really dead, others that "it's only make believe, it's only pretence!" The Father declares that it is "reality," and the Manager replies, "Pretence? Reality? To hell with it all!" The Manager laments that he has "lost a whole day over these people, a whole day!" and the **curtain** falls, ending the play.

The end of the play fulfills the predictions the Step-Daughter and Father made in Act One, even though the audience might have lost track of these a long time before this final scene. As in so many ancient tragedies, although the characters and audience alike all know the dark prophecy that will be fulfilled, everyone is surprised when it actually happens. The revolver that the Boy mysteriously produced at the beginning of the Second Act finally finds a purpose, even if its existence remains unexplained throughout, just like the motives and context behind the deaths of the Boy and Child, which seem to happen for no reason at all—and yet represent a kind of symbolic response to the family's trauma. Namely, their deaths at once show the deep impacts of the Father's actions on the children (whose muteness the audience can now come to understand) and undo the illegitimacy of the family, restoring it to the original form—Father, Mother, Son. However, this far-from-happy nuclear family arises only as a curse and a farce, just as the Father's attempts to create an ideal family continuously backfire. Curiously absent from this English edition of the text is the final stage direction obeyed in nearly all performances of this play, in which the Step-Daughter runs offstage and out of the theater, screaming maniacally.

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