Father’s Day

In Search of 6 Characters in Search of an Author

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A man has a wife and a male child. He also has a male secretary. Between the wife and the secretary there arises what the husband considers an understanding of a harmless sort. He wants to help them in some way, but whenever he speaks to them they exchange a significant look that seems to ask how they should receive what he says if they are not to annoy him. But this itself annoys him. He ends up firing the secretary. Then he sends the wife after him. In the wife’s view, he fairly throws her into the secretary’s arms; and the pair set up house together. The husband, however, does not lose interest in the wife. His continued interest, indeed, though he considers it “pure” (that is: asexual) is a source of embarrassment to the former secretary. When a daughter is born to the lovers the husband is interested in her too—more, perhaps, even, than he had been in the wife. And when she becomes a schoolgirl, he waits for school coming out, then seeks her out, and on at least one occasion gives her a present. The girl, of course, does not know who the strange gentleman is. At a certain point the secretary can bear the whole situation no longer, and he takes his family—there are three children by this time—to live somewhere else, out of their stepfather’s reach. Subsequently the secretary dies. His family of four is now destitute; they all have to sleep in the same room. And at some point they return to the place where the husband lived. Here the mother gets employment as a kind of seamstress. But her employer’s real interest is in employing the daughter, now in her late teens, as a prostitute. The dressmaker’s shop is a front for a brothel. One day, the husband, a client of the establishment, presents himself and would have taken the girl in his arms had not the mother suddenly turned up to cry: “But it’s my daughter!” After this encounter, the husband takes his wife back into his home along with his three step-children. At the time, he is living with his own son, now in his early twenties. This legitimate son is offended by the presence of the three bastards, and wanders from room to room in his father’s house, feeling displaced and desolate. The three bastards react to his hostility. The little girl, aged four, drowns herself in the fountain in the garden. The other child, a 14-year-old boy, witnesses the drowning, fails to offer any assistance, then shoots himself. The mother, who might have been keep-

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ing an eye on the young pair, was, instead, following her 22-year-old son around the house, begging for forgiveness. He rushes out into the garden to escape her, and there comes upon his step-brother just at the moment the latter watches his sister die and kills himself. After this debacle, the older girl runs away from home. Left behind are father, mother, and son...

I am, of course, trying to tell the story of Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore, or rather the story of the six characters in the play. This is quite hard, and an analysis of the work might well begin with the reasons why it is hard. The first reason is pretty much what it would be with an Ibsen play. It is hard to tell the story of, say, Ghosts because it comes out in fragments and the fragments have to be painstakingly fitted together. The Ibsenite has, above all, to be able to take a hint; he even has to have the detective’s knack of snapping up bits of evidence and holding them in reserve till he can connect them with something else. However, while Ibsen’s fragments come together into a complete and coherent picture, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, Pirandello defies a number of the normal expectations and, by the usual criteria, his picture is incomplete. As to location, for instance, which in the drama, at least since Aristotle, has always been considered something to have a clear understanding about. In most plays one knows exactly where everything takes place, and in plays where the location is somewhat abstract, there is a convention to make this abstractness acceptable to its audience. In retelling Pirandello’s story just now, however, I paused several times, hoping to insert a phrase indicating where someone had gone or returned to. The husband’s house could be in Rome, I suppose, but couldn’t it just as easily be anywhere else with a climate favorable to fountains? Could I even say: “returned to the city”? Not even that, because the only clues are a school, a house with a fountain in the garden, and a modiste’s shop that is also a brothel; things that exist in small towns and villages as well. It is not, of course, that one insists on naturalism, but that one cannot react without a degree of bafflement to not knowing under what circumstances the secretary lived with the wife in city, town, or village; how far away he then took her; where the bedroom in which all four slept was to be found; and so on. But the queries as to place only lead to similar queries on other topics—notably time. Here at least Pirandello has marked certain boundaries, notably the ages of the four children. Since the legitimate son is 22, and the eldest bastard is 18, it follows that the transfer of the wife from husband to lover occurred about 20 years ago. Yet, in the Pirandellian context, how little this arithmetic means! In Ibsen, doing such arithmetic usually proves well worthwhile, but in Six Characters it would never be done at all, except by such an undiscourageable investigator as myself, willing to follow any trail. This trail has proved a false one. In the rare instances where exact notation of the passage of time is going to affect our sense of drama, Pirandello does the arithmetic for us. The reiterated statement that the secretary died “two months ago” tells us that the death marks the beginning of the Action that is this play, just as the father’s death marks the beginning of the Hamlet action, and the aunt’s death the beginning of the action of Enrico IV.

Generally, time and space, in the story of the six characters, are alike rather abstract and are tokens of a pervasive abstractness. Who is the Father? The question: what does he do? is no more answered than: where does he live? To place him, either liter-
ally or figuratively, all we can do is remark that his vocabulary marks him as something of an intellectual—a student of Pirandellian philosophy, even—and that his having a secretary and a sizable house (with rooms to wander through and a garden with a fountain in it) marks him as well-to-do. By contrast, wife and secretary are defined as poor, the Italian word umile leaving open whether they were just of humble birth or also humble by nature. Of the elder girl we know that poverty made her a prostitute; and we see that she resents her father. Of the two youngest children we learn little except that their birth was illegitimate. The young man is so withdrawn and silent that we can be told he is a character not fully created because not suited to a play at all: only part of him, as it were, is there. To say the least, then, these are people of no particular background. We can say they are Italians, but our evidence is only that the play is written in Italian. We can say they are bourgeois, yet even for this the evidence is largely negative: in our culture, the bourgeois is the norm, and the speech of this play is normal, except for Madama Pace who, like lower-class New York City today, has a Spanish accent. Incidentally, only Madama Pace has a name. Does that make her the only character portrayed with particularity? Hardly; her name is a symbolic one. It means peace, and is presumably used ironically: she brings, not peace, but a pair of scissors.

Plays without what are called individual characters, with characters labelled The Father and the like, are no new thing. They were the usual thing in the Expressionist plays of the second decade of this century, the decade during which the ideas for Six Characters came to Pirandello. Is this an Expressionist play, then? One is certainly encouraged to believe so by the stage direction in which the six are introduced. All, says the author, are to wear masks which

will help to give the impression of figures constructed by art, each one unchangeably fixed in the expression of its own fundamental sentiment, thus: REMORSE in the case of the Father; REVENGE in the case of the Stepdaughter; DISDAIN in the case of the Son; GRIEF in the case of the Mother, who should have wax tears fixed in the rings under her eyes and on her cheeks, as with the sculpted and painted images of the mater dolorosa in church.

Here we are being offered abstract qualities as characters, as in those medieval moralities which are the ancestors of Expressionist drama. But the fact is that the stage direction does little to prepare us for what is offered by way of character in the dia-

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1 The evidence for this is in two short stories, “La tragedia d’un personaggio” (1911) and “Colloqui coi personaggi” (1915), in a letter to his son Stefano dated 1917, and in a passage (undated) from a projected novel-in-the-making cited in the sixth volume of the collected works (1960). This last-named passage is about Madama Pace’s establishment, and suggests the possibility that it was with this image that Six Characters began—a tempting point in the light of the interpretation of the play offered above. The letter to Stefano is also cited to this extent in the sixth volume of the collected works: “...But I already have my head full of novelties! So many short stories...And a queer thing, so sad, so very sad: Six Characters in Search of an Author; novel-in-the-making. Maybe you understand. Six characters, caught in a terrible drama, who visit me, hoping to get themselves put into a novel. An obsession. And I don’t want to know about it. I tell them it’s no use. What do I care about them? What do I care about anything? And they show me all their sores. And I send them packing...and in this way finally the novel-in-the-making turns out to be made.” Incidentally, in the projected novel-in-the-making, Madama Pace’s shop did have a precise location: Rome.
logue itself—not abstract qualities or general ideas but emotional conflict of very unusual vividness, vivacity, and fullness. The word Expressionism is not the clue we need.

What is? Perhaps the phrase: dream play. Some of the earliest critics of Pirandello’s plays noticed that, in them, “life is a dream.” Two features, more than anything else, contributed to this impression: first, the “dreamlike” comings and goings to and from nowhere of Pirandello’s people; second, that the author seems haunted, “possessed,” by these people. Now the first of these features, appearing by itself, need not signify very much. It is a formal device any author might choose to adopt. It would prove nothing more than that, perhaps, he had read Strindberg. The second feature, however, if further explored, will lead us deep into Pirandello’s play, whereupon we shall also learn that, for him, the first feature was not lightly adopted or trivially used.

What is Pirandello possessed by? That drama should present the dynamics of relationship, and not separate individual portraits, is in the nature of the genre. But Pirandello is an extremist in this regard. No one has made do with so few individual traits and details of background while managing to make the contact between people so electric. This kind of drama, one is tempted to say, is ALL relationship and NO character. Six Non-Characters in Search of an Author! Or, translating this from negative to positive: In Search of an Author, these relationships—Man/Wife, Father/Daughter, Mother/Son. There can be little doubt what Pirandello is possessed by: elemental family relationships. Our next questions, then, should be: if he has not offered us a cold typicality but has brought relationships to passionate life, how has he done it? If he has not approached these relationships in the accepted, naturalistic way, how has he approached them? And now our queries are turning back on themselves, for Pirandello’s method has already been touched on, and is that of dreams, not the dreams of the older literary tradition, either, but the actual fantasies of our actual day and night dreaming. And here it would be well to limit the word phantasy to the technical sense given it by Freud when he said: “Phantasies are psychical facades constructed to bar the way to . . . memories” of primal scenes.² (Like Freud’s translator, I will spell the word with “ph” when this sense is intended.) This may be only one kind of fantasy among many, but it is amazing how close to the principal images and thoughts of Six Characters Freud’s definition brings us.

In this play we are never far away from primal scenes, and specifically three of them: incest of father with daughter; the child seeing the parents make love; and sibling murder. Each of these scenes is veiled by at least one layer of phantasy. Even the sibling murder, which comes closest to such a scene, is not actually a murder: the boy refrained from preventing a suicide. . . . of the incest, two layers of phantasy at once present themselves. The girl is not a daughter but a stepdaughter, and the lovemaking does not quite take place. The most thoroughly hidden of the three primal scenes is that of the son seeing his father in the role of lover; and how strong was Pirandello’s wish to hide this scene is shown in the fact that he deleted from later edi-

Hasn't he [it is the Son, speaking of the Father] acted in such a way as to force me to discover what no son should ever discover? That father and mother are alive and are man and woman, for each other, outside the reality we give them. For as soon as this reality is uncovered, our life is no longer tied to that man and that woman except at a single point—one which will only shame them should we see it.

A single point. One touches one's parents at the moment one is conceived. There, for the one and only time, as the parental genitals touch, are all three of us touching. It is the only togetherness life affords. Such is the painfully vivid Pirandellian version of this primal scene. It links the Old Testament shame at the sight of parental nakedness with the Pascalian sense of hopeless isolation in an alien universe. The specific veils the scene wears are also of interest. First, this Son has not discovered anyone making love. What he has done is notice the erotic quality in a relationship he did not expect to be erotic. It was not that of his father and mother. It was that of his father and his stepsister. But the suspicion is—and it is not the suspicion of the son alone—that the stepsister is taking the mother's place in bed.

A psychoanalyst, Dr. Charles Kligerman, has made an observation that digs deeper into the plot of Six Characters than anything, so far as I know, that purely literary critics have said. It is that we have here, not an assortment, but a sequence of phantasies, each more primitive than the last—each belonging to an earlier phase of our lives than the last. "In other words, from adult father/daughter incest there is a retreat to the earlier Oedipal triangle, and then a sudden regression to the primitive sibling rivalry, with wishful phantasy of murder followed by guilty suicide."3

The dramatist cannot be content merely to present phantasies (or fantasies either), he must arrange them in significant progression. It is Dr. Kligerman's thesis, I take it, that the three main phantasies constitute a dramatic beginning, middle, and end. The question is: of what? That they make up the beginning, middle, and end of the six characters' own story is pretty clear. Does that make them the beginning, middle, and end of the whole work? Rather naturally giving psychology priority over dramatic art, our psychoanalytic interpreter seems to answer this in the affirmative, and backs up his answer with biographical rather than artistic evidence. "The Father, Son, and Boy," says Dr. Kligerman, "all represent different levels of conflict within the author." This may well be a true statement on the sources of the matter presented. It does not follow that the three characters, once created, are best considered as three aspects of one character. All the characters a playwright "creates" come out of himself, just as his dreams do, and may similarly correspond to parts of himself. The important thing, artistically, is that they then become objectified, and demand to be seen, not as aspects of their author, but as his creations. If this is true, our protagonist in Six Characters has real others (not himself in other forms) to act upon and be acted upon by. This is a man and his son, not a man and himself, though, biologically and symbolically, a man and his son are overlapping categories.

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And the end of the family story is not, as I think Dr. Kligerman assumes, the double suicide, but the situation that ensues thereon. It is described thus in the first edition:

Because, finally, the drama is all in this: when the mother re-enters my home, the family she had elsewhere, which was now being, as it were, superimposed on the first one, comes to an end, it's alien, it can't grow in this soil. The little girl dies, the little boy comes to a tragic end, the older girl flees. And so, after all the torment, there remain we three—myself, the mother, the son. And when the alien family is gone, we too find ourselves alien, the one to the other. We find ourselves utterly desolated.

The Father is given these words toward the end of Act One. Later Pirandello must have concluded both that the passage came at the wrong place and that it was too explicit. He put it off to the very end of the play and did the job without words: the final version states in a stage direction that father, mother, and son are left on stage at the end when the daughter rushes out of their home. They form a tableau with the mother's arms outstretched towards the obdurate son. Which I take to mean that the double suicide is not the final phantasy. Rather, the dramatist insists on returning to the Oedipal image: the family story begins and ends with father, mother, and son. The daughter and two younger children came and went. Their father had gone forever just before we meet them. The second family is killed off. We see the effect upon the first family which lives on, bearing the brunt.

So far I have been talking exclusively of the six characters' story, which is complete (as complete as it is going to be) before the show starts: it is all time past. Does nothing happen on stage except a re-enactment of this past? Does nothing happen before our eyes and now, for the first time, in the present? Certainly it does. The six characters enter a theatre and ask the director to make a play of them. He toys with the idea; indeed, devotes the day to trying it out. A negative decision is reached, and that is the end. The first edition actually closes with the line, and it is a very good curtain line: "E mi hanno fatto perdere una giornata!"—"And they've made me lose a whole day."

I am describing now, of course, the conceit or trovata which gave the play fame, and even notoriety: the idea of an encounter between a company of actors and the roles they might be asked to play. Can it be disposed of lightly? "The plot of the play within a play," Dr. Kligerman says, "contains the essential drama, for the rest is comic badinage... and a great deal of discussion..." If valid, this would be a devastating criticism: no dramatic masterpiece... much dead wood in it. Conversely, if this is a great play, expressive in all its parts, then both the "badinage" and the "great deal of discussion" will be found to be necessary to its structure. Let us look further into the matter.

Drama is action. "An encounter between a company of actors and the roles they might play": this is a formula for action, but as it stands it is too general. Action has to be more specific than that. Who exactly is doing what to whom? We have always to come to this question. Take the first bit of it first: who is doing? It needs hardly

4 I should perhaps say Section One, as the Italian editions have no act divisions. But many Americans know the play from a translation that names the sections Acts.
a moment's reflection on Six Characters in Search of an Author to produce an answer that comes from an overpowering impression. The Father is doing. If an Action is here being propelled forward by a character, then that propeller is the Father. He is indeed so manically insistent that he might seem at times to be lifting the play up bodily. His insistency is a huge motif, and a huge portion of the play. What is he doing? He is demanding that his drama be staged. Why? He is persuaded that he will be thereby justified. A hostile interpretation of his character will be rejected, a friendly one endorsed. Does he really believe this? It is hard to say. He is so intent on stressing what should be, it is hard to know if he is confident that it will be. If he gets nowhere, will he settle for less? It looks very much as if the less that he will settle for is the act of pleading itself. He evidently gets a release from just talking, from unburdening himself. He is, among other things, an Ancient Mariner, buttonholing people and inflicting his story on them. And one knows what satisfaction all Ancient Mariners get from this kind of thing, because every one of us is something of an Ancient Mariner. For this mariner, certainly, saying his piece is a matter of life and death. I am reminded of a patient cited in R. D. Laing's book The Divided Self as saying that he talked as an act of self-preservation. That is, of course, to imply that his existence was threatened. And the sense of such a threat is felt in all the big talking in Pirandello—that of his Enrico, that of his Ponza and Frola, and that of the Father. The topic, here, is schizophrenia, and Pirandello's plays have become easier to comprehend in the light of studies of schizophrenia written in the past several decades.

It is interesting that in two generations a great dramatist has led the psychologists in providing a classic image of modern man. Ibsen, just before Freud, presented Modern Man as Neurotic. Pirandello, anticipating the study of schizophrenia by a whole school of psychiatrists from Minkowski to Laing, showed how integral to modern life is "the schizophrenic experience." His Enrico IV is the schizophrenic as tragic hero: "... the experience and behavior that gets labelled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation." In Cosi è (se vi pare), the Ponza/Frola narrative is an elaboration of such a special strategy, neither more nor less. Such strategies constitute the sanity of the insane, the rationality of the irrational. That is one paradox which Pirandello has in common with recent psychologists. Another is that the sane may not be any more rational. So one can regard the insane as sane, and the sane as insane. In 1967 the thought is no longer new, but new testimony to its truth is printed in each day's newspaper.

What is the Father doing? He is talking to live, that is, to avoid getting killed. He is fighting off the arrows of the Indian hordes of the soul. Dr. Laing calls that kind of threat the world's implosion. The Father is also trying to keep from drowning, from inundation. Dr. Laing speaks of engulfment. Like a witch doctor, the Father hopes to hold the devils and hobgoblins at arms' length. In short, he is what our grandparents called a lunatic. He is "mad as a hatter." Critics and actors who have resisted this conclusion have never got very far with Six Characters in Search of an Author.

Yet the Father's behavior on stage is the least of it. In drama, as in life, character is

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found in concentrated form in men's decisions and in actions of theirs which entail decisions. What have been this man's decisions? Since he is nothing if not a father and a husband, we must ask what he has done for his son and his wife. When the former was a baby he sent him into the country to be nursed. It would be healthier. This is a rich man who prefers the ways of the poor. But when does he have his son brought back? We are not told, except that it was too late. The boy returned as an alien and an enemy. And the wife? He pushed her into the arms of his secretary. These, too, were good, simple people—also poor—who understood each other. In short, the father's actions have been such as to destroy his own family by driving them away. Obviously, he is what is usually called schizophrenic, and must isolate himself, even though isolation, in turn, becomes torture. If he can't stand company, equally he cannot stand himself. Desperate measures are taken against the outer world on behalf of the inner world, but to no avail. The inner world feels as insecure as ever, and the Father goes out in search of... well, in the first instance, company.

Two is company. That is: company is sex. The Father becomes a client of Madama Pace's, the Pacifying Madam. We know what, in external terms, goes wrong at her place. What does it all signify? Again, it suffices to look closely at the specific data. His wife he considered motherly but asexual. Madama Pace is a mother who sells sex. She is motherhood degraded, and she is sex degraded. As Dr. Kligerman has noticed, she is the "giantess of the nursery," the castrating nanny, and, according to the first version, carries scissors. Perhaps it was defensiveness that made Pirandello omit the scissors from the revised text; surely they are a vivid touch. And the Stepdaughter, whatever else she is, is the Mother when young, the Mother with sex-appeal, as in Enrico IV, where the Emperor embraces the daughter instead of the mother. What is the substance of the encounter at Madama Pace's? The evil mother offers our man a girl. The girl says: my father just died. The man says: take your dress off. The good mother rushes in, crying: stop, that's my daughter! A hideous little instrument of self-torture, this phantasy, though no more so than a thousand others in the chronicles of schizophrenia.

In nothing is the complexity of Pirandello's dramaturgy more evident than in this creation, Madama Pace. She is not one of the six characters. She is conjured up by the spirit of the theatre on the initiative of the Father. What does he mean by this initiative, and what does his author mean? Six Characters in Search of an Author can be conceived of as many concentric circles, in which case Madama Pace might well be the innermost circle: play within play within play within play.... The most helpful insight into plays within plays—or rather dreams within dreams—has been Freud's. He remarked that we dream we are dreaming when we especially wish to disown a particular phantasy as "only a dream." And the phantasies we particularly wish to disown present what troubles us most in a rather blunt form. Madama Pace is not one of the actors, she is not one of the six, she is conjured up by one of the six, or by his "idea of a theatre." Most likely (as psychoanalysts will suggest) she is what troubles Pirandello. Certainly she is what troubles the Father: his mother as "giantess of the nursery," as castrator. Above all as procuress—provider and degrader of sexual pleasure. The Father is this play's Dr. Faustus, and she is his bad angel.

If she is a go-between, between whom does she go? Between the two families that
the six characters consist of. And the story of the six can usefully be seen as a confrontation of these two groups, the legitimate and the illegitimate, pursuing licit and illicit love. Each of the three traumatic situations I have described brings the two groups into desperate conflict: father with his wife's illegitimate daughter, adulterous mother with the legitimate son, illegitimate younger children with the legitimate son. It is appropriate to this play that one finds oneself proposing different ways of looking at it. Each way is likely to have its peculiar advantage. And the schema just provided has the advantage of bringing out the special importance of the Son. He "dominates" two of the bad situations, and is not outside the third one (since he reacts strongly to the "incest"). When we speak of sibling murder, we can cite the Son as the murderer of both younger children.

If the confrontation of the legitimate and the illegitimate families is important to the structure of the play, what of the confrontation we began to look into a few minutes ago, that of the family with the theatrical troupe? Of all the concentric circles, this is perhaps the outermost one. Which in itself might tend to make a psychiatrist regard it as the least important, since the doctor's job is to look for hidden disease and penetrate disguises. Art, however, is not a disease, and in theatre art the disguise is in a clear sense the ding an sich. Nor—contrary to what many academic as well as clinical critics assume—does the artist harbor a general prejudice in favor of hidden meanings and against obvious ones. On the contrary, the weight to be given to the most external of the dramas in Six Characters must be decided without prejudice against externality. It is wholly a question of what weight, by his own artistic means, Pirandello gave to it.

Well, to begin with, he derived the title of the whole work from it, and considering how unerring his intuition was in such matters, this "small" item should not be overlooked. Granted that the substance of Action in the work is inner, neurotic, and even schizophrenic experience, what of the ever-present fact that the vehicle of Action is this conceit: characters in search of an author? It is a search with two aspects: the wish for a play to be written and the wish for it to be enacted. Let us take the second aspect first.

Enactment. If there is anything we are not in doubt about after we have seen this play it is that, for its author, all the world is a stage. "Totus mundus facit histrionem," as the motto of the Globe Theatre read. But the idea receives a specific application here that is not so obvious. What happens when the actors try to enact the Scene in Madama Pace's shop? They fail. But the point of the passage is lost when the actors are presented as inept. That kind of failure has too little content. A bad actor is a bad actor, period. What relationship does Pirandello define between the real thing and the re-enactment? Is it not that of a translation that cannot in the nature of things be a faithful one? The best analogy I can find is with the attempt to reconstruct a dream with the aid of notes jotted down upon waking. The notes are very definite, perhaps; but they are fragmentary. There are gaps, and above all the tone of feeling that characterized the whole world of the dream has gone. The Pirandellian re-enactment is incomplete and deeply unsatisfying in just this way.

But enactment is only an offshoot anyway, an offshoot of what is to be enacted: the author's work. IN CERCA D'AUTORE. And who is searching for him? Six char-
acters? Not really. There is no evidence that the two children think themselves engaged in such a search. Like children generally, they are dragged along. The older boy definitely objects to the search, practices civil disobedience against it: that is what breaks up the experiment, and precipitates the end of the play. The mother is distressed by the experiment, and gets pulled in against her will. That leaves just two characters who do search for an author—the Father and the Stepdaughter. And only these two had previously pleaded with the author who created them to make them part of a complete work of art:

...trying to persuade him, trying to push him...I would appear before him sometimes, sometimes she would go to him, sometimes that poor mother...

(The Father)

...I too went there, sir, to tempt him, many times, in the melancholy of that study of his, at the twilight hour when he would sit stretched out in his armchair, unable to make up his mind to switch the light on, and letting the evening shadows invade the room, knowing that these shadows were alive with us...

(The Stepdaughter)

Even the Stepdaughter has only a conditional interest in finding an author, the condition being that the Father insists on finding him. Then she will meet the challenge. The Father is the challenger: it is his project. And the play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is his play—not in the sense that other characters are aspects of him but in the sense that he is consistently the prime mover. The story of the six starts from his actions—in marrying, in becoming a father, but even more in driving wife and son out. It starts again from his actions on the death of his rival: meeting the daughter at Madama Pace’s, taking the family back into his house. The various family catastrophes stem from him. He is the base of that Oedipal triangle on which the family story rests. Last—and, to a dramatic critic, not least—he takes the initiative in the new and present Action. Our play begins with the arrival of the Father at the theatre, and from then on what we are witnessing is the encounter of the Father with the *Capocomico*. The latter is a Director, not an Author—yet another of the play’s special twists—but the question before us is whether he will take on a writer’s chores and write, as well as direct, the play into which the six characters would properly fit. As soon as he has decided not to, “our play is done,” and Father’s Day is over.

It is odd that anyone should speak of character conflicts in *Six Characters* without mentioning the one that stands in the foreground and works its way out in the primary Action. I suppose it could only happen because of that prejudice in favor of the secret and murky that I was speaking of. In itself the Father/Director confrontation is an archetypal affair: the confrontation of pathetic suffering humanity with the authorities. And these authorities are portrayed, in almost Shavian fashion, not as hostile and malicious, but as open-natured, well-meaning, and far more reasonable than suffering humanity. It is true they are also smug, a little stupid, and very much out of contact—theirs is the life-style of bureaucrats and organization men.

Which would just be a picture of normal experience except that Pirandello pushes it, in his usual manner, far beyond the normalities; and Father and Director come to
embody two sides of a schizophrenic situation. Through the Father we glimpse the inner world of modern man; through the Director, the outer. Both these worlds are shown as spiritually impoverished. The inner world of the Father contains nothing much besides his two or three phantasies and the pain he feels in failing to justify himself. The Director's outer world is reduced to rituals that preserve the appearances and maintain the occasion, habits, routines, clichés. All that either the Father or the Director does is repeat himself, a factor which is close to the central metaphor of the play: life as theatre. Which aspect of theatre is exhibited in this play? Not performance. Only rehearsal—rêpétition. The stage is bare. The auditorium is empty. The theatre, too, is impoverished and deprived. The bourgeois drama, which had become thrilling through a kind of claustrophobic tension, here dissolves in agoraphobia, its opposite.

What is the Father seeking in the Director? An author who will put him in a play and justify him. In what sense "justify"? First of all, defend him from the Stepdaughter's charge of bestiality by citing the sexual needs of middle-aged men living apart from their wives, and so on. Is that all? Nothing in Six Characters is ever all. If the plot has an outermost circle, the theme hasn't. It reaches out towards infinity, a place where there is either emptiness or God. It should not be too surprising that a great play of dead or agonized fatherhood reverberates with the sense of God the Father, or rather of his absence—the "death of God." A search for an author can easily suggest a search for the Author of our being, and the main metaphor of the play has reminded some people of Calderón's El Gran Teatro del Mundo. I only wonder they haven't commented on the opening words of that work: "Sale el Autor." "Enter the Author in a starry mantle with nine rays of light in groups of threes on his hat." This is, of course, God.

It is not necessary to assume that Pirandello had Calderón in mind, or that he thought directly of God at all. God is meaning, God is authority and authorship, God is fatherhood. A poignant sense of the absence of all these burns through every page of Six Characters in Search of an Author.

To me, the deepest—or perhaps I mean soundest—interpretation of the search for an author would stress neither God nor literary authorship but fatherhood, and I like to think I derive this choice, not from personal predilection, but from the text. The concise way of stating what the Father demands of the Director in human terms—and Pirandello is always in search of the centrally human—is to say he is asking him to be his father. "Father me." "Rescue me from this maniacal female." "Tell me what is so, reassure me, help me find my place in the story, in the scheme of things, take from me this burden which I cannot bear but which you can." And the Director is very much the daddy of his troupe: that is established at his first entrance. But being the daddy of these light-weight thespians is one thing, taking on suffering, schizoid humanity is another, particularly taking on one who calls himself "Father" and should be able to fend for himself. In any event, the Director is another very inadequate Father. Something of a grotesque, he stands in the same relationship to fatherhood as Madama Pace does to motherhood. (Father, Director, Secretary-Lover: three fathers. Mother, Pace, Stepdaughter: three mothers. Another of this play's many symmetries.) But while she castrates, he is castrated: he has the character of
the traditional impotent old clown. Our intellectual author transposes this impotence to the literary plane where the Director can prove impotent to make art from the Father’s life, life from the Father’s art.

In one respect the word author is exactly right in suggesting just what a father might be expected to provide. When the Father finds the right playwright he will not be content to be given some dialogue in which he can rapidly discomfit his stepdaughter. His ambition goes far beyond that. He is not even saying: “Write a melodrama, and make me the hero.” He is saying: “A person is an entity with no clear meaning—an entity close to nonentity—unless there is an author to make him part of (a part in) a play.”

A severed hand, Aristotle has it, is not a hand at all, because it could only function as a hand by belonging to arm and body. A character severed from a play is not even a character. A person severed from his family is not even a person. But what is he? And what can he do about it? We need to watch the words and actions of the Father to find the answer to such questions. Is the Father’s quest as hopeless as the effort to graft a hand back onto an arm? Or is success in the quest within the power of an Author—in one sense or another of the word “author”? This is not a play that provides answers. At any rate it is not a play that provides positive answers. But neither is it a play in which the objects of yearning have been eliminated. Nostalgia pervades it. Nostalgia for what? For some kind of “togetherness.” Is this just a regressive fantasy, the longing for the union of embryo and mother? Child and mother? There is something here of the modern isolated individual’s longing for a social community, but again it is a longing directed backwards toward some golden age, not forwards towards a new society. By consequence it is a fantasy, not of freedom, but of freely accepted bondage.

If only the Father could be part of a play, so he explains in the terms of Pirandello’s literary conceit, he would have the permanence of Sancho Panza or Don Abbondio. Interpreting the play, we might translate this back into terms of life, thus: to have a part in a play means to be a member of a family, and the family is seen as an organism in which each cell lives in and by a happy interdependence. Before such a family could exist, the kind of life we find in Pirandello’s play would need to be enormously enriched. It requires a texture far finer than phantasy and fear and guilt can provide. God is love; Father, too, would have to be love. That is the kind of Father this Father is in search of, in a play which might just as well be called A Father in Search of a Father.

The crowning, and Pirandellian, irony comes when the Director’s contribution to the proposed “drama,” instead of enriching it, actually impoverishes it further. I am speaking of his work on the Scene in Act Two. What he starts from is a piece of raw life, or rather a piece of raw erotic phantasy. Give this bit of life or phantasy to a Shakespeare, in the age of Shakespeare, and it becomes Antony and Cleopatra with noble enough roles in it for many. All our Director can do is convert it into what in America we would call Broadway drama, in which the already attenuated naturalism of the Scene has to be further attenuated in the interests of middle-class entertainment.
Shakespeare proves in *Hamlet* that the schizophrenia of an Ophelia can be part of a grand design. Pirandello is interested in showing that in life she would encounter someone like the Director in *Six Characters* or the Doctor in *Enrico IV*. That is to say, she would be on her own. Which is what schizophrenia is. Art is sane. Life is schizoid; and offers only schizoid solutions, as in *Cosi è* (*si vi pare*). In *Enrico IV*, the schizoid solution is a starting point, then the "sane" people break it to pieces, as it is always the itch of "sane" people to do. One must reckon with this itch in the Director and Actors in *Six Characters*. Yet the play exhibits neither a solution nor a cataclysm—only a constantly re-enacted phantasy, a father journeying endlessly onwards like the Flying Dutchman.

Now what the Dutchman was searching for was love. Is the Father's aim all that different?

This is the point at which that "great deal of discussion" which Dr. Kligerman complains of can perhaps be comprehended, for the bulk of it consists of long speeches made by the Father. If, as most critics have assumed, they are really there as exposition of a philosophy, then surely they will be an unwelcome intrusion. What is their content? I'd say that two main points are made, one directed at the Stepdaughter (particularly towards the end of Act One), one directed at the Director (particularly at the beginning of Act Three). The first point is that personality is not unitary but multiple. The second point is that illusion is reality. In the context it is not essential that these topics be regarded as interesting in themselves. They are dramatized. Which is to say, they become Action. Just as talking is something the Father has to do to live, so resorting to the particular "talking points" he makes is a matter of urgent necessity for him. If the theory of multiple personality did not exist he would have to invent it. It gets him off the hook on which the incident at Madama Pace's had hung him. He is not necessarily right, however, even though his view coincides with the author's philosophy. From the point of view of drama, I would hold that he is wrong. For the art of drama, as Aristotle explained, takes for granted that actions do define a character. A man is what he does at Madama Pace's, and all his talk about really being otherwise is so much... well, talk. Whatever Pirandello may have believed, his dramas are drama, and present people as their actions. True, talking is an action—the Father's principal action most of the time—but it is precisely his compulsive talking that inclines us not to accept the endless self-pity and self-justification at face value. The Father feels that he is many and not one. But that, as we blithely say, is "his problem." He is a very irresponsible man, if sane; and, if not responsible for his actions, then insane. On either assumption, he needs just the philosophy Pirandello gives him. Nothing diffuses responsibility more conveniently than the theory that one is a succession of different people. And if one is insane, one is surely entitled to complain a good deal of that radical disjunction which is one's fate. One may even project it on everyone else.

Freud compares paranoid fantasies to metaphysical systems. It is a comparison that makes some sense in reverse. The Pirandellian metaphysics provides apt fantasies for his mentally disturbed characters.

I gave as the Father's second philosophic idea that illusion is reality. Which is also
“what everybody knows about Luigi Pirandello.” To say that illusion is reality is, on the face of it, nonsense but can be construed as sense by taking it paradoxically. It is as a paradox that the notion has its primary use to Pirandello, for paradoxes, when expanded, become comedies. The expansion happens, in Pirandello, by doubling and re-doubling. Take, in our play, the opposites life and art. The actors are from life. The characters are from art. However, nothing begins to “pop” as comedy, as drama, until the author reverses the proposition. The characters are more real, are therefore portrayed more as what we regard as people from life: they have instincts, impulses, private lives. The actors are less real, and are therefore portrayed as artifacts, as “types,” as creatures out of a play. In short the actors are from art. The characters from life. What one might call the intellectual comedy of Six Characters in Search of an Author is built upon this reversibility of the key terms. And what is the truth? Which is “really” life, and which is “really” art? There Pirandello-Laudisi lies in wait for us—laughing. Everything in his little system (or game, if we must be up-to-date) works both ways. Nothing is “really” so, because everything is “really” so.

Now a person making use of this system—a person playing this game—can have everything both ways. Which is a very nice way to have everything: it is what we all want, though in proportion as we cease to be childish or sick we learn to do without a good deal of what we all want. The Father, however, is childish and sick. The Pirandellian game is after his own heart. In Act Two, he is essentially telling the actors to subordinate their art to life. All that is wrong with their performance is that it isn’t naturalistic, it isn’t exactly what happened in Madama Pace’s shop. But in his theoretical vein, he usually exalts art above life. Similarly, he can use the word illusion in a pejorative sense, as when he tells the Director that the actors’ lives are more an illusion than the characters’ lives, while in the same breath speaking of illusion with respect and a kind of nostalgic awe. All of this is word play, word game, inconclusive, and in principle endless—and therefore very depressing. Pirandello can call Laudisi-ism “devilment” and ask for a comedic tone, but it is black comedy at best: its underside is despair. Pursue any statement the Father may offer as consolation, and you will find it lets you down with a bump. For example: art as a solution to the bafflements of impermanence. As a statue you can live forever. The only thing is: you’re dead. Petrifaction is no answer, but only corresponds to yet another schizoid wish. And anyone who knows this particular Father will quickly sense that his wish to be a work of art is his wish to escape from flesh and blood, that is, from life. As with other schizophrenics, the great fear of being killed does not prevent him from yearning for death. Indeed it is at this stage of the argument that we realize that the Father’s two main arguments have for him the same point: he wants to get out of his own skin. He is “one.” But he cites as an alibi that nobody is one, we are each of us a hundred thousand. He is real. But he cites as an alibi that nobody is real. He is trying to non-exist. His personality can, as it were, be diffused horizontally, losing itself in moments or states of mind, alleged other personalities. Or it can be diffused vertically in vapors of idea. But total non-existence is too terrifying to flatly accept. One has to try and coax it into acceptability. By paradox. By dialectic. All of which is evasion, though, for a schizophrenic, a necessary evasion.
“If the self is not true to itself, it is in despair,” says Kierkegaard. Pirandello depicts a despair so deep that his schizophrenics cannot afford to admit they have selves to be untrue to. The theory of multiple personality is a byproduct of the despair, and, for the Father, a necessary fiction.

The very notion that illusion is reality stems from defeatism. Philosophically, it represents the breakdown of the Hegelian tradition in which there was always a reality to offset appearances. Once the reality starts to be eroded, there will eventually be nothing left but the appearances; and at this point in time philosophers start to advocate accepting facts at face value—face value is the only value they have or the world has. Hence, for example, a contemporary of Pirandello’s who later became the house philosopher of Mussolini, Giovanni Gentile, wrote in 1916: “The true is what is in the making.”

In this respect, there are only two interpretations of Six Characters in Search of an Author. According to one, the play itself endorses Gentile, endorses the Father’s philosophic utterances. According to the other, which I subscribe to, the play is larger than the Father, “places” him in a larger setting, makes his pathos unsympathetic. I am not going to argue that the play embodies a positive faith. A critic who recently did this had to rely upon a single sentence that is present only in the first edition. I am arguing that it is not a philosophical play at all because the philosophy is harnessed to a non-philosophical chariot. The content is psychopathological from beginning to end.

Perhaps I’ve said overmuch about psychological motifs. This is an exuberant, excessive, Sicilian work, and from perhaps overmuch suggestiveness may easily come overmuch critical suggestion. Let my last comments be about the form of the work. The first thing a traditional critic—if such a person still exists—would notice about this search for an author is that it respects the unities of time, place, and action. In other words, it conspicuously possesses that compact and classic dramatic structure which the “play in the making” (with its story of the six) conspicuously lacks. The space of time covered is just literally the time spent in the theatre, with no extra hours even in the intermissions. Place is given in an equally literal way. And there is something Pirandellian in the fact that such literalness could be a brainstorm. What earned the Maestro the highest compliments for originality was that in this work the boards of the theatre represent—the boards of the theatre. That is to say, they do not represent, they are. They are appearance which are the reality: the quintessential Pirandellian principle.

The final point of this handling of place is a dialectical one. The boards of the theatre are to be so definite, so “real,” because the “unreal” streets of the town and country, the gardens, the houses and rooms are to be so shadowy, so “unreal.” The interaction of these two elements gives Pirandello a goodly part of his play—and a good deal that is peculiar to his play.

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Time also is handled dialectically. Over against this flatly undistorted present on the stage is the story of the six, all of which is already past. The six are trying to pull all this baggage of theirs—as the patient on the doctor’s couch does—from the dim anaesthetic past into the garish, stinging present. Past and present are given so clearly demarcated an existence that some critics have seen only the one, some only the other. But, to see what Pirandello is doing, we not only have to see both, we have to see how the two constantly react upon each other.

By an error which was to create a possibly permanent misunderstanding, Six Characters in Search of an Author in its first edition was subtitled: “a play in the making.” But the play in the making is the projected play about the six characters that never gets made. The play that gets made is the play about the encounter of the six characters (seven, finally) with the Director and his acting troupe. This of course includes as much of the unwritten play as is needed. Finally, then, Six Characters became a play fully made. Bernard Shaw has been quoted as calling it the most original play ever written. Very likely it is. It is a supreme contribution that says something profound about the theatre and about life seen as theatre and seen by means of theatre. The originality should not blind us to the beauty of the form or to that existential anguish which is the content.

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*The Italian original reads: “una commedia de fare.” In the translation most widely read in America, this has been rendered: “a comedy in the making.” But in Italian, as in French, a “commedia” (comédie) is not necessarily comic, and the word should often be translated as a “play.” (That the story of the six should turn out comic is out of the question.) Secondly, if the phrase “in the making” suggests, as I think it does, that there are the makings of a play in this material (which is the opposite of what Pirandello is saying) then it is a mistranslation of “da fare,” which means, literally, “to make,” and, less literally, “to be made,” “yet to be made,” “not yet made.” Incidentally, “in the making” cited above from Giovanni Gentile does not translate “da fare.” Gentile’s original reads: “Vero è quel che si fa,” which would be rendered literally: “True is that which is done.”

*Originally quoted by Pirandello himself in a more fulsome form (Revue de Paris, 15 July, 1925). When Mr. Frederick May brought this quotation to Shaw’s attention, the latter replied: “I have no recollection of the extravagant dictum you quote: but I rank P. as first rate among playwrights, and have never come across a play so original as Six Characters [sic]” (The Shavian, February, 1964).

All quotations from Six Characters are from a new English version of my own, so far unpublished and unproduced.