

**Pirandellian Dark Comedy in Wendy Wasserstein's
(The Heidi Chronicles)**

Ayman Ibrahim Elhalafawy (*)

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to study Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988) as a dark comedy in the light of Pirandello's definition of dark comedy. Wendy Wasserstein (1950-2006) is one of the contemporary female playwrights who makes use of dark comedy. She is an excellent example of the genre dark comedy in the late twentieth century. This study attempts to explore a brief history of the genre and its predecessors and of expert opinions on the subject. Since all of the theorists in this study agree that Pirandello laid the groundwork for modern tragicomedy, through his plays and from *On Humor*, Pirandello's key points are identified and used as guidelines for determining the criteria with which to assess Wasserstein's play as a dark comedy. Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988) is evaluated using the principles suggested by Pirandello: contradiction, opposition, and skepticism, and the three aspects of character: incongruity, humanness, and pity and sympathy. In conclusion, it turns out that Wasserstein transformed the genre, made it suitable to her time and re-stated its significance as a method for revealing human frailty

* Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Kafr El-Sheikh University, Egypt

كوميديا بيرانديللو السوداء في مسرحية ويندي واسرشتاين (سجلات هايدى)
ايمن الحلفاوي

ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة مسرحية الكاتبة الأمريكية وندي وسيرتين وقائع حياة هايدى (1988) كمثال للكوميديا السوداء في ضوء مفهوم برندلوا عن الكوميديا السوداء إذ تعد وندي وسيرتين إحدى أبرز الكتاب الأمريكان المعاصرين المتميزة باستخدام هذا الأسلوب في أواخر العشرينات . وتبدأ الدراسة بعرض موجز عن مفهوم الكوميديا السوداء مع استعراض أهم الكتاب الرواد في استخدام هذا النوع ويأتى برندلو في مقدمة هؤلاء الرواد الذين تميزوا في استخدام هذا الأسلوب في مسرحيته المختلفة وفي مقالته النقدية *On Humor*. لذا يقوم هذا البحث بتطبيق مفهوم برندلو للكوميديا السوداء على مسرحية ويندي وسيرتين وقائع حياة هايدى لإثبات كيف أن أسلوب ويندي وسيرتين يعد مثالا فريدا للكوميديا السوداء في المسرح العالمي.

The main aim of this paper is to study Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988) as a dark comedy in the light of Pirandello's definition of dark comedy. The line between tragedy and comedy is often thin and at times barely discernable. Certain playwrights have a gift for blurring this line, which allows audiences to receive their message without often knowing if they should be laughing at what appears to be a serious topic.

Wendy Wasserstein (1950-2006) is one of the contemporary female playwrights who makes use of dark comedy. She is an excellent example of the genre dark comedy in the late twentieth century. She has won critical acclaim, Pulitzer Prizes and numerous additional awards for her writing. Wendy Wasserstein was the first woman in history to win the Pulitzer Prize as the author of an original play. In a 2001 *Harper* article on a new generation of women playwrights, the first sentence reads "When you think of female playwrights, two words invariably come to mind: Wendy Wasserstein" (334). Feminist Sally Burke writes that the feminist playwrights who began their work in the 1970s, even those who won Obie Awards, were virtually ignored except by scholars of feminist drama; this list includes Wasserstein (1). She is one of the most important playwrights of our time, yet her work lacks the critical and scholarly attention it deserves.

Tragicomedy has been, in practice if not always in theory, a theatrical genre since the plays of the ancient Greeks. Even though the genre existed, it was never truly acknowledged by Aristotle, Horace and other classical theorists. Playwrights and critics recognized tragicomedy as distinct from tragedy and comedy, but it took twentieth century theorists to accurately define its form and substance. The progression of critical theory and research, and the desire to outline the current style of tragicomedy has prompted modern theorists to document the changes in the genre over time. Several authors from Aristotle to Pirandello have addressed the movement, and critics since Pirandello have researched and redefined its points.

The term "tragicomedy" was widely used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to describe the plays of a mixed nature. In

Modern Tragicomedy: An Investigation into the Nature of the Genre, critic Karl S. Guthke discusses the confusion of the term and suggests several different types of tragicomedy based on numerous individual interpretations. It is a broad term, which theorist J.L. Styan, in *The Dark Comedy*, admits is too vague to reflect the "dark characteristics of twentieth century dramaturgy" (52), so he renames the current form "dark comedy". He claims that dark comedy "has had its fullest expression in the last sixty years" (7), which is why he feels that the movement deserves a fresh title. The first edition of Styan's study was published in 1962. The term tragicomedy does not adequately describe the many facets of the genre today, so dark comedy will be used in this study.

It is necessary, in this study, to explore a brief history of the genre and its predecessors, and of expert opinions on the subject. The viewpoints offered represent the voices of those who have defined modern dark comedy. Plautus is credited with originating the term tragicomedy (*tragicocomoedia*) in reference to his work *Amphitryon*, written between 205 and 184 B.C. In the prologue, Mercury states: "What? Frowning because I said this was to be a tragedy? I am a god: I'll transform it. I'll convert this same play from traged to comedy, if you like, and never change a line. [...] I shall mix things up: let it be tragic-comedy" (Plautus 9).

The first attempt to explain the term came from neo-classical critics and dramatists of the Renaissance. Guarini's theories as expressed in his 1601 treatise, *Compendio della Poesia Tragicomica*, became guidelines for critics and writers of the time; yet in the opinion of critic David Hirst, "Guarini's theory cannot be applied to all plays in the mixed genre. [...] His thesis has little relevance for the vast range of modern tragicomedies"(xii). The limitations of Guarini's theories prohibit their current relevance, but they did provide a basis for later analysis.

Eighteenth century poets are credited with initiating the first wave of modern tragicomedy (Hirst 66). From this point until the twentieth century, tragicomic plays served as examples of the evolving form exclusive of theories or critiques. Hebbel and the German writers continued the tradition in the nineteenth century.

Playwrights in other countries reached a similar point by the end of the 1800's, and according to Hirst, twentieth century innovators Pirandello and Pinter are considered "successors of the eighteenth century pioneers" (44).

Many theorists agree that Pirandello's contributions to tragicomedies are great. *L'Umore* (*On Humor*), written in 1908 and revised in 1920, was translated into English in 1960, about the time that J.L. Styan wrote his treatise. In the introduction to their translation, Antonio Illiano and Danial P. Testa concur, "The obsession with depth psychology and the levels of human personality is what gives Pirandello's work its striking modern note, and reveals his innate interest in an area of study that has just begun to receive serious scientific attention"(viii).

Styan contends that Chekhov, Pirandello, Anouilh, Brecht and Beckett took a fresh approach to twentieth century playwriting (2). While the works of all the aforementioned writers provide examples of dark comedy, it is Pirandello's plays and his essay *L'Umore*, which offer "the key to the comedy of our own times" (47). Guthke also considers Pirandello a twentieth century genius who, after WWII, remained popular with all European audiences (114). In *The Life of The Drama* , Eric Bentley concurs that modern tragicomedies contain the "seeds of Pirandello's work" (318), while David Hirst concludes, "Pirandello first explored the ludicrousness and torment brought about by the awareness of our personality as a mass of contradictions, our very existence qualified by the viewpoints and opinions of other" (101).

John Orr agrees that, "tragicomedy becomes unthinkable without the work of Luigi Pirandello. Pirandello breaks more decisively with pre-modernist drama than the expressionists" (15) and he creates new structures of feeling "through his unique fusion of rupture and shock, here the self appears to the audience as an image in a shattered mirror" (17). In *The Critical Idiom: Tragicomedy*, David Hirst concurs with Orr's assertion:

Moreover, there is in Pirandello's drama a control of emotion, a balance of feeling and thought [...] the effect of this constant shift of perspective means that we are made

to sympathize with the situation in which the characters find themselves, and yet we are made aware of the inherent absurdity of their predicament. It is a technique productive not so much of laughter as of comic distortion. Like Shakespeare before him, and Brecht after him, Pirandello is obsessed with the unreality of the theatre as a mirror for the shifting realities of life. (105)

Having described the development of dark comedy into its current form and the importance of Pirandello's example, it is necessary to define the tenets by which it can be analyzed using his work as the point of origin. Pirandello's plays and his doctrine *On Humor* were sufficient guidelines for tragicomedy through the 1950s; but Styan (1962), Bentley (1964), Guthke (1966) and Orr (1991) have described dark comedy at different points post-1950 and have provided a framework for interpreting the modern form. All four critics agree on certain characteristics and argue for the influence of dark comedy in mid to late twentieth-century drama. Resonances with Pirandello's theories are evident in the works of all four critics.

The first area of consensus is the idea that dark comedy is the voice of the twentieth century. No other artistic style reflects the thoughts and feelings of its audience as effectively as dark comedy (Styan, *The Dark*, 288). It exemplifies the most modern form of despair and, in Guthke's opinion, depicts a depersonalized man in a mechanic age (113); "the modern writer has no choice but to reach comedy by way of tragedy" (Guthke 119). This new type of drama emerged in the 1950s to showcase the "monstrous ironies of life" which were used as the subjects and themes of the modern stage (Guthke 114).

Critics of the time also predicted that dark comedy would become the wave of the future because of its ability to address, in Styan's phrase, "the ambiguities and ugliness of life" (*The Dark* 296). Through the expertise of the dark comic writers, theatre of the 1950s and early 1960s offered "more than a diversion and an escape" (296) from the effects of wars past, present and future. In Eric Bentley's view, the result of dark comedy is not meant necessarily to reform or change the world: "It is an adjustment to the world, a way of living

with Hitler. [...] The expression 'grin and bear it' says it all. [...] The purpose is survival: the easing of the burden of existence to the point that it may be borne"(347). Orr concludes:

We are confronted with a world in which there appears to be little continuity of character or of action. [...] There is a structure to the apparent confusion, a historical development which starts with Pirandello. [...] Initially it is part of a general response to crisis in value and the collapse of order in European society from 1910-1925 through war, revolution and economic catastrophe. Above all it is a movement away from a sense of social experience anchored in tangible issues of moral right, of the good and the just and of their betrayal. (1)

Critics also agree that dark comedy has become a prominent genre because it is expressive of the general human condition as perceived in the modern world (Guthke 97). Since it deals with fundamental human issues, it can lead to self-awareness. It does so by balancing "comic repetition against tragic downfall. It demonstrates the co-existence of amusement and pity, terror and laughter" (Orr 1). Exposure to dark comedy can be cathartic and fulfilling since the shift from laughter to tears energizes the spectator (Styan, *The Dark*, 118), and it is best and most painful when it disturbs the audience.

If a spectator commits to letting his guard down and opening himself up to dark comedy, he will be "left with a glow of new experience"(Styan, *The Dark* 291). In *The Life of the Drama*, Eric Bentley uses *Waiting for Godot* to show that this "new experience, " however, can be so paralyzing that it is virtually unexplainable, and is unrelieved by any last act *deus ex machine* [...] it hangs in the air" (348), since Godot never comes. He continues, "Though it springs from despair and conveys despair, it also springs from joy and conveys joy" (Bentley 350). Beckett is playful in his approach, which makes it worthwhile to take the risk. And ultimately, what can be derived from this possible dissatisfaction is a subversion of middle class attitudes, which allows for looking at new ideas from many different directions. The root of tragicomedy, therefore, is hope. When confronted with liars and cheaters, there is a need to

remove oneself from those who offer false expectations. Nietzsche's famous quote, "what does not kill me makes me stronger," justifies facing pain in that it allows for the discovery of hope through despair. It is appealing because it is "the only kind of hope we are in a position to accept" (Bentley 353). These ideas are also inherent in tragedy, but according to Bentley, "tragedy is not enough. Tragedy itself has limits: indeed it excludes most of the experience of most men"(338).

Since all of the theorists in this study agree that Pirandello laid the groundwork for modern tragicomedy, through his plays and from *On Humor*, Pirandello's key points will be identified and used as guidelines for determining the criteria with which to assess Wasserstein's play as a dark comedy. Pirandello's essay will, in turn, be supplemented by the subsequent theories of Styran, Bentley, Guthke, and Orr.

In the introduction to their translation of *L' Umorismo* , Iliano and Testa write:

Pirandello argues that man continually fabricates illusions about himself and about reality because he needs to give a meaning and a coherence to his life and to the world. Thus it is that man cloaks his empty reality with his mental constructions and with the abstracting work of logic. Because the humorist is endowed with a special activity of reflection, his role is to tear the masks away and remind man of the harsh reality of his predicament. (xii-xiii)

This hardly sounds humorous, but Pirandello uses the term 'humor' in the same way the term tragicomedy was used before him. He stresses a need for the genre, which he sees as the only form of comedy able to grow with the changes of the 20th century. Pirandello remarks, "the inner and peculiarly essential process of humor is one that inevitably dismantles, splits and disrupts" (*L' Umorismo* 31), thereby allowing us to better cope with the adversity we face.

Pirandello does not want the psychological meaning of humor to be confused with the ancient view of physical humors - blood, bile, phlegm and melancholy – which imply sickness. He concludes, "In short, the Italian word *umore* [which is derived from Latin *humor*]

does not correspond to the English humor" (*L' Umorismo* 2-3). And even though Pirandello tells us that there is no true definition of humor (107), he does offer a list of general properties to observe:

[...] a fundamental "contradiction" which is usually said to derive principally from the discord which feeling and meditation discover either between real life and the human ideal or between human aspirations and human frailty and weeping and laughing; the skepticism which gives color to all humorous observations and descriptions; and, finally, the minutely and even cunningly analytical process of that skepticism . [...] From all these characteristics and resultant definitions, I repeat, one can reach an understanding, in general terms, of what humor is, but it will undeniably be an understanding which is too summary. (*L' Umorismo* 109)

He concludes that the true meaning of humor can not be fully realized or explained, and that we can only subscribe to a general outline of ideas. From this definition, however, it can be determined that contradiction is the key element in dark comedy.

According to Styan, the discord Pirandello speaks of will "make the audience suffer without relief of tears and make it mock without a true relief of laughter" (*The Dark* 260). This will cause the audience to feel distance while at the same time feel "strangely involved" (*The Dark* 260). There is a delicate balance between comedy and tragedy that must exist to achieve the desired dark comic result, which causes audience to "weep at moments of great happiness and laugh at times of great anguish, which may naturally happen through an unconscious apprehension of life's vagaries" (*The Dark* 278). In Pirandello's plays, he offers characters who exemplify this point, and who in turn cause the audience to experience the same dilemma. In *It Is So! (If You Think So)*, Laudisi bursts out laughing at the end of each act, while the rest of the characters in his presence experience discomfort. He finds it humorous that they agonize over the truth about Ponza's family. In *Six Characters In Search of an Author*, the Step-Daughter laughs when the actors are attempting to reenact the bitter story of her family. They are serious about their

task and she cannot hold back her opinion. This "clash of tears and laughter" makes the audience uncomfortable, but they must experience this dichotomy if they are to grasp the disturbing irony of Pirandello's play. Styan adds, "In drama their conflict is serviceable if that peace is to be disturbed" (*The Dark* 282). When dark comedy, or the "swing between the extremes of tragedy and farce" occurs in the same framework it is the best way to make a relevant impact on today's society (*The Dark* 282).

For contradiction to occur, a dark comedy first "must surprise, dislocate, fragment and disorient, forcing the spectator to uncomfortable judgment" (Orr 11). Second, it should include two kinds of experiences: playfulness and the breakdown of perception, which Orr calls play and misrecognition: 'Disrecognitions are forms of forgetting, failures, or refusals to recognize the objects of one's surroundings" (17). Play should occur when disrecognition exists, and is a necessary reaction to the lack of morality that is evident in today's society. Orr contests that this process is illuminated through any event which results in the loss of human control (18). In Pirandello's *Henry IV*, all points are evident. "Play" is addressed through Henry's invention of a past life, which is a game to see how long he can fool those who have fallen for his travesty. "Disrecognition" occurs when characters in the play dismiss what Henry does not acknowledge; for example, the two modern portraits on the wall in an eleventh century castle. Loss of control results when Henry stabs Landolph. Orr concludes that by offering both play and disrecognition, recognizable meanings are disrupted, and that familiar objects are transformed into things that are unfamiliar (32). This is easily identifiable in the aforementioned play.

The use of language in dark comedy is also key to understanding contradiction in the genre since it helps to create the feeling of discord identified by Pirandello. Writers of dark comedy use "a language that is ultimately not their own which sells them short in its failures to connect just as much as it deludes them in their bid to wield power" (Orr 41). In other words, language is the medium for illuminating contradiction. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Father concurs:

But don't you see that 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. (224)

For a contradiction to occur, Pirandello suggests that reflected images should be presented in conflict. He believes that reflection explains several, if not all, characteristics essential to humor, and concludes : "Each image, each group of images evokes and attracts contrary ones, and these naturally divide the spirit which, in its restlessness, is obstinately determined to find or establish the most astonishing relationships between these images" (*On Humor* 119). He adds that reflection, as an integral part of humor, prompts conflicting ideas and images to surface, which results in the comic and the opposite both being present in and a byproduct of tragicomedy (124). Pirandello continues:

Reflection is not hidden, it does not remain invisible: it is not, that is, almost a form of feeling or almost a mirror in which feeling contemplates itself; rather it places itself squarely before the feeling in a judging attitude, and, detaching itself from it, analyzes it and disassembles its imagery; from this analysis and decomposition, however, there arises or emerges a new feeling which could be called and in fact I call the *feeling of the opposite*. (*On Humor* 113)

The mirror imagery which results in the feeling of the opposite is quite different from Hamlet's advice to the players in Act II of *Hamlet*:

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the

purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now,
was as is, to hold, as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to
show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the
very age and body of the time his form and pressure....
(Shakespeare 98)

Shakespeare suggests that Hamlet's mirror shows an exact replica of what is literally reflected. Pirandello's mirror requires that what is reflected be disassembled and analyzed to produce an opposite feeling from a true mirror image. This form of opposition is explored in all Pirandello's best-known plays. In *It Is So (If You Think So)*, Laudisi addresses himself in the mirror several times and questions who he really is as opposed to how others see him. When being visited by a group of ladies, he asks the butler, "Are you really sure the Laudisi you are talking to is the Laudisi ladies want to see" (103)? In *Henry IV*, Landolph explains to Berthold why Henry does not acknowledge the modern paintings in the ancient castle "If we put you before a mirror, won't you see yourself alive, but dressed up in ancient costume? Well, it's as if there were two mirrors there, which cast back living images in the midst of a world which, as you well see, when you have lived with us, come to life too" (145). And in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Son remarks, "Yes, but haven't you yet perceived that it isn't possible to live in front of a mirror which not only freezes us with the image of ourselves, but throws our likeness back at us with a horrible grimace" (274). In each case, the character is encouraged to explore his image, which results in discovering another side of himself. Pirandello further explains that comedy is a result of this opposing feeling since the spectator's original feelings remain hidden; he is able to laugh at the opposite since he cannot laugh at himself. He admits that this characteristic is found in all humoristic work: "Our only concern is to verify that this feeling of the opposite does arise, and that it arises from a special activity which reflection requires in the conception of such works of art" (*On Humor* 118).

All four critics have strong views regarding Pirandello's idea of "feeling the opposite," and agree that it is a necessary ingredient in dark comedy. "Feeling the opposite" requires the spectator to

associate with the state of being which is presented in opposition. For example, if the viewer is lazy, he may laugh at an overly energetic character who is actually mocking the viewer's disposition. Pirandello clearly sets up opposites so the audience can relate to and analyze the characters they observe on stage. In *It Is So (If You Think So)*, Sirelli says of his wife, "The moment I tell her something she is convinced it is not quite as I say. Then, sooner or later, she claims that it can't be as I say. And at a last she is certain that it is the exact opposite of what I say!" (69). In *Henry IV*, Henry warns, "Because it's a terrible thing if you don't hold on to that which seems true to you today- to that which will seem true to you tomorrow, even if it is the opposite of that which seemed true to you yesterday" (193). Both excerpts are humorous because of their playful rhetoric, but contain truths which are identifiable by any viewer.

According to Styan, a writer of dark comedy should "balance loves and hates, which may cause us to sympathize with the villain, laugh at misfortune, and forgive the sinner"(Styan, *The Dark* 286). The author should entice the audience to explore these opposites and encourage them to judge the characters and their actions. They should do so with caution, however, and should avoid making the experience too personal (285), even though the aim of dark comedy is to create an uncomfortable state of mind. The writer must "mix sufficient reality to hold our belief with sufficient unreality to have us accept the pain of others. At the point of balance we are in pain ourselves, and the play is meaningful' (Styan, *The Dark* 255). In addition, the shift between comedy and tragedy, and the art of maintaining a balance between them, should be employed by the author in an attempt to awaken the audience.

Bentley discusses the idea of opposites in dark comedy as "a wrestling match with no holds barred" (342), between opposing viewpoints presented to the audience. He recognizes that the genre offers a subdued view of the world, yet like Styan, sees the necessity that it must awaken its public at the same time. It deals with aggressions that "can neither be transcended nor brought to heel, they are human nature, they are life, they rule the world"(342). Most people are attracted to aggression and like to be challenged, which

leads to the idea of finding pleasure in pain. The use of humor ultimately "reinforces the already considerable attraction which modern tragicomedy holds for unusually aggressive persons" (Bentley 346). To ensure this outcome, most dark comedies are comedies with tragic endings and the function of the comic element is to contrast the darkness which further deepens the tragic effect (Bentley 345). Both *Henry IV* and *Six Characters in Search of an Author* exemplify this point since they are humorous in nature but end tragically with events of confusion and murder.

Guthke holds that identification of opposites is basic to tragicomedy as is a certain attitude of the audience- "sympathetic participation and emotional involvement, on the one hand, and aesthetic distance and intellectual awareness, on the other" (47). This idea is similar to Bentley's assertion that the audience is awakened in a dark comedy (involvement), while it is presented with a subdued view of the world (distance). Guthke continues,

This is what happens in modern tragicomedy. In it, the reciprocity of the interaction of the tragic and the comic is essential. In comedy the moments of "tragic" suffering or terror are merely designed to heighten our appreciation of the comic as the spectator realizes that suffering and terror have no actual basis in the reality of the situation. In tragedy a touch of judiciously placed comedy or irony is apt to enhance the tragic awareness, "on this condition," as Sarcey puts it, "that the disturbing element should no interfere with the first impression, by a slight effect of contrast." (58)

In dark comedy, the temptation to laugh is compelling since laughter will distance us from what is strange or incomprehensible. Orr remarks, "laughter is shadowed by the darkness of human downfall which cannot be exhausted by rational explanation [...] we the audience are left with its residue" (8). Tragicomedy also produces a double vision, yet spectators are unable to recognize their "diminished doubles who in turn fail to recognize each other" (Orr 9). When we distance ourselves from what we have tried to suppress, we actually bring ourselves closer to our demons; "For that very act of disassociation confirms a repressed likeness" (Orr 9). Dark

comedy illuminates what we have tried to bury, which ultimately stems from a loss of control (Orr 26). "The structures of feeling have been transformed. The self is in a vacuum and knows no morality. Suicide will never happen. Instead of alienation we have failures to recognize" (Orr 34). Dark comedy divides the spirit and "seems to contain all of the American culture yet cannot be pinned down. It finally eludes definition" (Orr 20).

In *On Humor*, Pirandello summarizes:

Humor consists in the feeling of the opposite produced by the special activity of reflection, which does not remain hidden and does not become, as usual in art, a form of feeling, but its opposite, though it follows closely behind the feeling as the shadow follows the body. The ordinary artist pays attention only to the body; the humorist pays attention to both, and sometimes more to the shadow than the body: he notices all the tricks of the shadow, the way it sometimes grows longer and sometimes short and squat, almost as if to mimic the body, which meanwhile is indifferent to it and does not pay any attention to it. (145)

The opposite is as important as a character's own perception of himself in dark comedy. The use and manipulation of the opposite can add or subtract humor as the author sees fit. In *Henry IV*, at first we are led to believe that Henry is mad, and it is humorous to participate in the game with the players on stage. Once Henry admits his charade to his counselors and emerges as the opposite of what we first believed, the humor subsides, but it is still amusing to watch the unknowing characters try to appease the "insane" Henry. Finally, when Henry questions his own madness after Frida and Charles emerge from the portraits, our laughter begins to diminish through the end of the play when Henry kills Landolph. The treatment of this "shadow" can help to determine how much humor will actually be employed in a dark comedy.

From the feeling of the opposite stems the idea of irony. The dictionary definition of irony is, 'the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning' (*Webster's Dictionary* 606). Pirandello calls this type of

irony rhetorical irony, and does not consider it to be humorous in and of itself. He calls it "a deception contrary to the nature of genuine humor" (*On Humor* 5), and claims that with rhetorical humor the feeling of the opposite does not occur. He adds, "the contradiction which in irony is only verbal, between what the writer says and what he wants understood, would become real and substantial, and therefore would no longer be ironic" (131). He does claim, however, that philosophical irony, when "the self can choose not to take its own creation seriously," can be related to true humor (6-7). In *On Humor*, he quotes German romantic dramatist Fredrich Schiller as saying:

[...] irony consists in the poet's never identifying completely with his own work, in his remaining fully aware, even in the moments of pathos, of the unreality of his creations, in not becoming the stooge of the phantoms created by his own imagination, and in laughing at the reader who is drawn into the game and also at himself who devotes his life to playing.(8)

Pirandello suggests that there is a place for philosophical irony in humor and agrees with Schiller's statement, which supports the idea that dramatic irony is found in dark comic works. *Webster's Dictionary* defines dramatic irony as the "incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play" (606). Schiller implies that an audience (spectator or reader) is needed for philosophical irony to exist.

This point leads to Pirandello's main byproduct in his definition of humor: the audience will be skeptical of what they observe and will be compelled to analyze their skepticism. The audience, then, should fully participate in the work for dark humor to emerge.

After viewing a dark comedy, spectators should "have the moral courage to admit gray into [their] thinking" (Styan, *The Dark* 287). There is a danger to leaving the audience in a dark mood and then expecting them to return to the theatre for more sadness, but dark comedy does force them to face truths about the nature of their society. This event compels the spectator to analyze the skepticism

he acquired from viewing the production. To assist the audience in this process, Pirandello allows his characters to experience what he wants his spectators to feel. Dark comedies grasp the viewer's attention, then they distract and disorient him, "so that time and time again he must review his own activity in watching the play [...] the drama redoubles its energy [...] the tension is one of dramatic irony" (Styan 262). In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, when the Manager tells the Father that he should philosophize less, the Father responds, "Well, if you want to take away from me the possibility of representing the torment of my spirit which never gives me peace, you will be suppressing me: that's all" (269). Like the Father, the audience has no choice but to philosophize as well. The final decision is ultimately the viewer's, however, and as a result he unfortunately finds himself "sharing the punishment of the victim. The irony is more incisive and painful because we have felt the peculiar misery of changing sides" (Styan, *The Dark* 266). In *Henry IV*, Henry reminds us "[...] the men of the twentieth century are torturing themselves in ceaseless anxiety to know how their fates and fortunes will work out" (195). The audience of today feels obligated to analyze situations that they too have experienced.

"Tragicomedy forces us to question the certainty of self at the same time as it forces us in general to question the certainty of knowledge" (Orr 4), which suggests skepticism. The entire premise of *It Is So! (If You Think So)* is based on this idea. Throughout the play, the people of the town are trying to decide who is telling the truth: Signora Frola or her son-in-law Ponza. They even question the validity of government documents, and in the end, they still do not discover the truth. Orr attests that the audience, in turn, shares their skepticism throughout the play because they too cannot determine the ultimate cause of anything, and feel that they have lost control of the dilemma (8), "for tragicomedy acknowledges neither the 'citizen' nor the future" (23). The audience member is then forced to analyze what they have become skeptical about: According to Orr,

The distancing effect intensifies the existing barriers to empathy. But it does something more. It enables tragicomedy to challenge those cultural conventions of

"natural" control so crucial to daily middle-class life, those complex forms of rational control over circumstance made possible by material success, specialized knowledge and cultural capital. It challenges the myth of rationality in the modern technological world. It cues us to the necessary but very flawed world of modern Reason, and we already know the pitfalls. [...] and we are clearly uneasy. The tragicomedy plays, at times devastatingly, upon this unease. (25)

In analyzing skepticism acquired from watching a dark comedy, the viewer gets closer to discovering the truth about himself, and the confusing society in which he lives.

As for character, Pirandello suggests that the humorist "will decompose the character into his elements and while the epic or dramatic poet takes pains to picture him as coherent in every action, the humorist enjoys representing him in his incongruities" (*On Humor* 143). He admits that humorists do not recognize heroes and see "a king in shirt sleeves" (143). They also place characters "against a background of ordinary events and common details" (144). Henry in *Henry IV* is a perfect example of both points. Pirandello also proposes that the reader/ spectator feels pity and sympathy for the characters while at the same time is able to laugh at them and at "our helpless human nature that is afflicted with so many frailties" (*On Humor* 130). In his laughter he will feel compassion (*On Humor* 132). In summary, a character in a dark comedy must be represented in his incongruities, should be an ordinary human being, and garner pity and sympathy from the reader/spectator who is also laughing at his disposition.

Incongruities emerge in characters "when our initial recognition of the clown in his traditional role of wit and joker is denied and contradicted, when he is shown as capable of suffering the pains of mundane life, pains which would not have mattered to him or us in his artificial character" (Styan, *The Dark* 270). This causes a double response for the onlooker. Additionally, modern tragicomedies, from Ibsen to 1966, are primarily character driven and require the protagonist to set the tone. Ibsen is designated as the

first truly modern tragicomic playwright and *The Wild Duck* is considered "the most perfectly realized tragicomedy in Western literature" (Guthke 146). Guthke analyzes Ibsen's text in order to define the dark comic protagonist. A comic figure must hide his tragic side through "clever intrigue" (152), and could be ruined if his tragic identity is revealed. This causes *Wild Duck* characters Hjalmar Ekdal or Gregers Werle to appear comic and sometimes ridiculous when faced with tragedy and his 'indirect relation to reality makes him comic and tragic at the same time; his love of illusion reaches ridiculous proportions at this point; it is the inadequacy of this attitude that we find funny, and this inadequacy is precisely what invites the impending disaster" (Guthke 157). Soon his tragic side is revealed, but only at the moment of truth, and comedy is still evident even at the height of tragedy; "the two are blended perfectly in each sentence and each word" (Guthke 160). This requires sentimental exaggeration, which is a result of suffering both tragically and comically at the same time (161). Henry's journey in *Henry IV* is a perfect example of Guthke's assertions. Henry's tragic side is hidden when he plays out his charade, and as soon as it is revealed, we still find humor in his disposition. We enjoy watching Henry fool those who have fallen for his deceit. Ultimately, however, the "impending disaster" is realized when Henry discovers that he actually is mad, prompting his downfall.

Structures of feeling in tragicomedy are incongruent with "those agonizing dilemmas of conscience its vulnerable heroes cannot resolve" (Orr 2). The dark comic character is a "diminished hero who no longer knows who he is, who lives out his life, at times consciously, in a masquerade" (Orr 15). More layers of the set are explored today than ever before, and as a result, dark comic characters appear more vulnerable and out of control when participating in situations that they did not necessarily create (Orr 31).

The ensemble in *It Is So! (If You Think So)* does not create their situation. They do become obsessed with finding the truth, however, and cause Poza's family great distress. Laudisi remarks, "They all want the truth – a truth that is: Something specific; something

concrete! They don't care what it is "(117). The characters' actions "are a response to the paradox of being estranged from the world and trapped by it at the same time. As a response to that paradox, their actions are both perverse and moral. With such ambiguity lies the sense of their tragic heroism "(Orr 34). Orr concludes:

The tragicomic persona is no longer a knowing person immersed in the dilemma of conscience, but stays helplessly anchored beneath that threshold of knowledge on which conscience is based. So baffled are bemused and lucid heroes by the nature of the world in which they live that the ontological conditions for justice do not even exist. In realism, justice is signposted in order that it may be evaded. But in tragicomedy the capacity to distinguish right and wrong barely seems to exist. (35)

As Pirandello suggests, dark comic characters are often ordinary human beings and are anything but heroes. "In dark comedy, the comic-pathetic hero, a creature who at the crisis is so human as to remember and hope rather than heed and act, often tends to assume universal qualities through the very individual and contradictory details that go to make him up" (Styan, *The Dark* 269). This "clown" is everyman, and can be a hero or an innocent bystander; it is the duty of dark comedy to show us both sides of the protagonist. This dual-character is an anti-hero, and is complex since he forces the spectator to see him or her in at least two different ways. "More than this, he calls for two or more responses, positive and negative and all the shades in between" (Styan, *The Dark* 270). In *It So! (If You Think So)*, each member of the Ponza family is viewed differently by those who think Ponza is telling the truth versus those who think Signora Frola's story is valid. In *Henry IV*, Henry has two identities: his true identity and his role as Henry IV. And in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the cast consists of the "characters in the comedy of the making," and their actor counterparts. In all three cases, dual-characters exist and both sides are shown throughout each play. Dark comedies also introduce dull and vibrant characters and a purely good or strictly bad soul will never surface. His or her character traits are "the duller elements of

human personality; stupidity, boredom, carelessness, doubt, disappointment, caprice, reluctance, vacillation, bungling, mediocrity- everything that seems paltry in us" (Styan, *The Dark* 275). The dark comic character "has no sure God to leap to" (290) and "is the character who makes the grand speech, but who has to clear his throat and scratch his nose" (Styan, *The Dark* 275).

A dark comic "hero's" humanity should also be emphasized: "exactly those elements which make the ludicrous figure the object of the audience's pity and sympathy make him a potentially tragic figure" (Guthke 149). Despite the fact that he may appear ridiculous, he is also a worthwhile human being. He is "the comic fool, the fake, the dupe of his own grand schemes even while the audience is already aware of the tragic calamity drawing closer and close" (Guthke 156), and " is weak, comfort-loving and half-hearted" (Guthke 162). He will never emerge as a hero and will never be able to clear his pain-stricken conscience. This is most apparent in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The Father insists on telling the story of his troubled family, which he knows will ultimately end in disaster. The audience senses this as well, since a revolver is introduced at the beginning of the second act.

The evolution of the modern dark comic character is someone who grows poorer and less powerful as he moves down the social ladder. This causes his tragic stature to shrink (Orr 2) . Dark comic characters are often victims and pathetic creatures, but their desire to succeed causes us to feel them regardless of their unattractive behavior (6). Orr continues,

Its outcast characters resemble at times latter-day consumers stripped of their adornments and their illusions, literally unrecognizable, forced to act out their parts with no good reason for doing so [...] Instead tragicomic characters perform with no cues or prompting and with apparent motive. Bracketed out of the natural world, performance has no cushion or meaning, no safety net. Environment is no longer clear, tangible or rationally accessible. It is replaced by an inscrutable fate in which intention seems severed from human action; in which

causality has been replaced by randomness of chance [...] fate still is an external force. [...] No longer in the lap of the gods, it is dispersed amidst the being of a profane world [...] just out of reach. Such accretions belong to the past, to myth, to wealth, to unseen forms of power. They are everywhere but here, never tangible or determinate. (7)

In *Henry IV*, Henry exemplifies many of these assertions. He creates a game, which he does not initially plan, yet plays it out with precise control. When he is thrown off course, fate steps in, and the madness he thought was non-existent, emerges.

Tragicomic characters are unique individuals for whom we have sympathy because their actions, however controversial, reflect a desire to clear their conscience. They shock us because they often possess few morals, which cause them to appear irrational (Orr 22):

They seem to have no neighbors, or be part of any neighborhood or community. They are largely isolated and implosive from the outset. Their visitors are outsiders to be feared or mistrusted. A part from such unwelcome intrusions into their domestic space the world, it seems, passes them by. They are insignificant or forgotten, not part of any collective life. They lack the power of connection. It is easy to see why tragicomedy then becomes a drama of pawns rather than pieces. Knowledge and power lie elsewhere. So does morality. By failing to understand themselves and the world in any absolute sense, the inhabitants of the tragicomic stage seem doomed to an existence without recognizable values. (37)

Pirandello refers to his characters in this way. In *Henry IV*, Landolph remarks, "We're like so many puppets hung on a wall, waiting for some one to come and move us or make us talk" (144). The Manager in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* concurs, as he speaks to the Father, "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" (214).

Lastly, Pirandello addresses the audience's response to the dark comic character through pity and sympathy. Despite the fact that the audience member is key to the success of this component, it is the

actor who must portray the character to produce such a feeling in his spectators. It is essential to the success of dark comedy. "They [the characters] are victims of themselves and of society – that is their tragedy and we feel for them; they are also members of that society [...] and we criticize them" (Styan, *The Dark* 276). However, the spectator may even sympathize too much which could result in an uncomfortable outcome: "The real climax of dark comedy may be, not the place where the hero is pressed to a decision, the villain unmasked, the situation brought to a crux, but the place where the tensions are so unbearable that we crave relief from our embarrassment" (Styan, *The Dark* 263).

According to Guthke, the dark comic protagonist is consciously created with sympathy and pity (148). He is one "whose life-long illusion is shattered [...] whose characteristic theatricality creeps into his lamentation [...] who easily transitions from one illusion to the other" (158). By the end of the play, he "no longer has any doubt in his mind as to the reality he must face, but he is unable to live up to the ideal" (162); this is why Henry kills Landolph in *Henry IV*. The spectator can easily relate to these personality flaws. The audience feels sympathy for the character since the character's life appears to fall apart suddenly causing the protagonist to break down emotionally (163). This "emotional outburst causes us to see his absurd misinterpretation of the reality which strikes us as slightly funny, its painfully sad implications for his state of mind notwithstanding. It is his inadequate, delusive relation to reality that makes him comic and tragic at the same time" (163). Eventually the tragicomic character emerges broken; the world has turned its back on him and he has ultimately failed himself (165). However, for Orr, the spectator will not emphasize with tragicomic characters because they are never really ourselves:

Whatever we see in these personae we do not recognize as something inhering in ourselves. On the other hand these strange personas we see on stage appear half the time not to recognize each other, or their own surroundings. Our own bewilderment is refracted by theirs, but therein lies the paradox[...] our failure to see anything normal in them

makes us normal. We lose sight of our own doubles, of those traces of resemblance buried beneath the play of the culturally impoverished. (8)

It can be argued that being made "normal" through the abnormality viewed on stage produces sympathy for the characters who seek, but cannot find their own sense of normality. This discovery forms a strong perception of what is "dark" about this form of comedy.

Pirandello and all of the aforementioned critics lay groundwork for analyzing the dark comedy of Wasserstein. The lineage of their theories and ideas is necessary to an evaluation of Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*. The work of Wasserstein will be evaluated using the principles suggested by Pirandello and the experts: contradiction, opposition, and skepticism, and the three aspects of character: incongruity, humanness, and pity and sympathy.

In Gussow's 1983 article in *The New York Times*, he describes Wasserstein's style as "nouvelle cuisine comedy". In a 1985 video interview, Wasserstein discusses her writing style with fellow playwright Corrine Jacker:

I am interested in writing comedy; how someone is either trapped in it or how they use it not to say what they're trying to say, and also as a way of bringing the audience in. I like the tension of a play that's both – that is comic so you have people listening to you and then right as they are laughing you hit them with what you're trying to say; and that kind of tension is most interesting to me. (*Emerging*)

Wasserstein's comments suggest that her intention is not to simply make her audience laugh, but to somehow illuminate her point when the viewer least expects it. C.W.E. Bigsby writes, "Wendy Wasserstein, then, seems to have accomplished that transition from comedy with a redeeming streak of seriousness to seriousness with a redeeming streak of comedy" (*Contemporary* 336). Howard Stein of *Theatre Week* speaks of Wasserstein's work as having a "humorous design [that] resonates with an aura of dark comedy and black humor" and "reflects and illuminates the tragic condition" (25); and the Delaware Humanities Forum acknowledges that "she has successfully balanced the funny, the serious, and the inspirational."

Wasserstein concludes, "The real reason for comedy is to hide the pain" (www.bemorecreative.com).

Like Pirandello, the protagonists created by Wendy Wasserstein can be described using the elements of dark comedy. This part will focus on Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* as a dark comedy. *The Heidi Chronicles* follows the life of Heidi Holland who is desperately trying to find herself and true happiness. She contemplates how a woman from the 1960s to the 1980s can balance her career with love and family, and still be fulfilled. Her temporary answers involve finding men to fill the void, yet in the end; she replaces that need with a child.

In *The Heidi Chronicles*, Heidi immediately emerges as the dark comedy protagonist, as evidenced in traits of incongruity, humanness, and pity and sympathy. In Act I, Heidi is observed in six different situations: she lectures at Columbia in 1989, attends a high school dance in 1965, meets her first serious lover at a McCarthy rally in 1968, visits a woman's meeting in 1970, protests at the Chicago Art Institute in 1974, and attends her ex-lover's wedding in 1977. As Heidi is presented in each circumstance her incongruities are revealed, despite the fact that her background is not ordinary or common as required in a dark comedy. She comes from a wealthy family, yet still experiences the same pains as a less fortunate woman in terms of finding her purpose in life. Her wealth may assist in providing resources to help search for an answer, but it does not guarantee the fulfillment that Heidi hopes to find. She is portrayed in a "traditional role of wit and joker" which is denied and contradicted when she is shown "suffering the pains of mundane life" (Styan, *The Dark* 270). Wasserstein's use of witty, verbal exchanges highlights the comedy throughout the play. In Scene 1, for example, she turns down a dance with a potential suitor and jokes about it to hide her insecurity. Her confident friend, Susan, decides to take over:

SUSAN. All right! Let's get organized here. Heidi, stand in front of me. I can't ask "twist and smoke" to dance with my skirt this long. What should I say to him? (*Susan rolls up skirt.*)

HEIDI. Ask him how he coordinates the twisting with the

smoking.

SUSAN. You know, as your best friend, I must tell you frankly that you're going to get really messed up unless you learn to take men seriously.

HEIDI. Susan, there is absolutely no difference between you and me and him. Except he can twist and smoke at the same time and we can get out of gym with an excuse called "I have my monthly". (10)

Heidi proceeds to take a seat and read a book at the dance, until Peter, who is more her equal, convinces her to take a chance on the dance floor. Whenever Heidi feels lost she hides her tragic side through clever intrigue as the dark comic tenet suggests. She uses her wit and sharp language to deal with each uncomfortable situation she faces. As a strange at a women's meeting in a subsequent scene, Heidi hesitates to open-up to the others and uses her intellect to remain guarded. This approach makes Heidi appear almost ridiculous when faced with "tragedy" at her ex-lover Scoop's wedding. She cannot accept the fact that he married Lisa instead of her :

SCOOP. (*Surprised.*) Heidella, if you haven't won this particular round, it doesn't mean you have to drop completely out of the match.

HEIDI. You still use lousy construction.

SCOOP. Yes, I do. And that's what makes me so much more interesting than the editor.

HEIDI. Fuck you.

SCOOP. You still use foul language.

HEIDI. You don't?

SCOOP. My wife doesn't care for it.

HEIDI. Well, clearly she's quality goods. (*Pause.*)

SCOOP. You really don't understand, do you?

HEIDO. I think I do. (38)

Scoop soon tells her that she is simply too much like him, which would create competition, and he would rather be with a woman that he can control:

SCOOP. [...] On a scale from one to ten, if you aim for six

and get six, everything will work out nicely. But if you aim for ten in all things and get six, you're going to be very disappointed . And unfortunately that's why you "quality time" girls are going to be one generation of disappointed women. Interesting, exemplary, even sexy, but basically unhappy. The ones who open doors usually are. (39)

This saddens Heidi, yet she continues to live the illusion that someday her version of a prince will come. Wasserstein uses witty banter again, as well as foul language, to maintain distance and assure a "spontaneous emotional interest" (Langer 139), thus resulting in comedy.

In Act II, the second half of *The Heidi Chronicles*, Heidi is further revealed in seven scenes: a lecture hall at Columbia University in 1989, Scoop and Lisa's apartment for a baby shower in 1980, a television studio for an interview in 1982, a trendy restaurant in 1984, The Plaza Hotel for a luncheon in 1986, a hospital to say goodbye to Peter in 1987, and an empty apartment with her new baby in 1989. All of these scenarios show Heidi's progression toward discovering her identity, which culminates at The Plaza Hotel during her keynote speech. The speech devolves into a story concerning Heidi's discomfort in a locker room of pretentious women before an exercise class, where she is overwhelmed by the incongruity of it all:

HEIDI. [...] I began giggling. "Oh." "That's okay." "Excuse me".

"I'm sorry." "I'm sorry I don't wear leather pants." "I'm sorry I don't eat brown rice." "I 'm sorry I don't want to stand naked and discuss Zeus sneakers." "I'm sorry I don't want you to find out I'm worthless. And superior." (*Pause.*) I'm embarrassed, no humiliated in front of every woman in that room. I'm envying women I don't even know. I'm envying women I don't eve like... And I'm sure the mothers in the pressed jeans think women like me chose the wrong road. (61)

Heidi's tragic side is fully revealed in this entire speech where humor and drama are perfectly blended to emphasize her moment of realization. She becomes a diminished character who no longer

knows who she is and decides to leave New York to sort out her future. Like a true dark comedy protagonist, she is vulnerable and has lost control. She realizes her downfalls and the comedy lies in the superiority felt by the spectator due to "man's delight in man's inhumanity to man" (Capp 220).

In the area of humanness, Heidi may not be ordinary, but can still be considered an everywoman for her generation. She is looking for fulfillment, a universal desire shared by women of all generations trying to balance personal dreams with societal expectations. The illusion of who she longs to be is overshadowed by her need to laugh off the heartaches and mask her true identity. She attempts to cover the duller elements of her personality and never turns to a higher power for assistance, as is characteristic of a dark comic protagonist. Her speech in Act II referenced above shows signs of a dark comic protagonist who "clears his throats and scratches her nose" (Styan, *The Dark* 275). She will never emerge as a hero, or as Guthke's tenet suggests, be able to clear her pain-stricken conscience (162). She attempts to do so by adopting a baby, however, but it is clear to the spectator that the question of happiness will remain unanswered for Heidi:

SCOOP. But now. Right now. Are you happy?

HEIDI. Well I have a daughter. And I've never been particularly

maternal . I'm not real practiced at sharing. But, Scoop, there's a chance. Just a milli-notion. That Pierre Rosenbaum and Judy Holland will meet on a plane over Chicago. And Pierre will tell her his father named him for a Canadian Prime Minister, and she'll say she was almost named for someone who sang "My Boyfriend's Back". And he'll never tell her it's either / or baby. And she'll never think she's worthless unless he lets her have it all. And may be, just maybe, things will be a little better. And yes, that does make me happy. (73-74)

Again Heidi is looking to the future for her happiness and is counting on her daughter to find fulfillment since she has failed to do so. She has isolated herself from most of her friends and has become

someone of no importance. She is now relying on her daughter to rely on a man to make her happy. Heidi appears as a pawn "unwittingly moving [herself] in the wrong direction" (Orr 37). Despite its serious overtones, this passage still remains humorous when considering Freud's tenet – for the unmasking of the comic character to be funny, he must "seize dignity and authority by a deception and these have to be taken from him in reality" (257). Heidi gains dignity and power throughout the play yet feels deceived by men and women who ultimately take both from her. She makes a questionable decision at the end of the play because she comes up with it herself and is finally not influenced by popular opinion. In *Wendy Wasserstein*, Gail Ciociola confirms, "critics have savaged the last scene not only for its unexpectedness but also for its implications"(77). Even though some spectators may feel cheated by the ending of the play, Wasserstein's choice for Heidi makes sense in the context of a dark comedy.

It is clear that the audience feel pity and sympathy for Heidi. She is clearly a victim of her self-doubts, yet it seems natural to criticize her and feel for her at the same time. In the end, her transition "from one illusion to the other" (Guthke 158) is witnessed most vividly in the adoption of her daughter. It makes sense to laugh in disbelief at the way she hopes to find happiness, but her justification for this choice is understood since the world has passed her by. Her friends made choices, for right or wrong motives, while Heidi failed to identify her most basic need – what will make me happy? Heidi's decision has raised controversy in feminist and theatrical circles. Likewise audience members may question their own belief systems about a woman's ability to fill the traditional role of wife and mother imposed by society while fulfilling her personal needs and potential.

The Heidi Chronicles contains several dark comedy elements of contradiction, opposition and skepticism. It employs contradiction by surprising the spectators, particularly in the end, dislocating and disconnecting them through the fragmented scenes, and forcing them to an uncomfortable judgment concerning Heidi's ultimate decision. It includes playfulness through Heidi's use of wit and humor, and disrecognition through Heidi's refusal to recognize her true

surroundings until the Act II, Scene 4 climactic monologue. Even after this epiphany, she takes this discovery and creates another illusion through the hope that her daughter's generation will solve the problems she could not.

The feeling of the opposite is apparent in several parts of *The Heidi Chronicles*. Who Heidi truly is versus what she wants to be is the basis of the play. She looks in the mirror as a woman who can have it all, but the person reflected back at her is the opposite—someone who is constantly searching for her true identity and cannot find a way to balance all aspects of her life. Heidi is in a wrestling match with herself over society's view of women and Wasserstein presents dual identities to the audience. Heidi's two sides become "diminished doubles who fail to recognize each other" (Orr 9). She confesses to her friend Susan in the scene before her realization, "Susie, do you ever think what makes you a person is also what keeps you from being a person?" (55). Her ability to finally see both sides of herself allows for the climax to occur. Heidi's situation is also ironic since she is able to laugh at herself despite her insecurities. To create irony, "the self can choose not to take its own creation seriously" (Pirandello, *On Humor* 6-7). This approach to life keeps Heidi from giving up on herself and assists in making her a dark comedy protagonist instead of a tragic figure.

Skepticism is also a factor in *The Heidi Chronicles* since the spectator is set up to "admit gray into [their] thinking" (Styan, *The Dark* 287). As much as we want Heidi to have it all, as much for her as ourselves, we question her approaches to finding the answer. One major reason for skepticism is due to Heidi's insistence on making a man part of the solution. In the first scene of the play she is hoping to meet a nice guy at a high school dance. In Scene 2 she gets together with Scoop for the first time. In Scene 3 she shows an awareness of her "man issue" and we think that she might decide to correct it:

HEIDI. But you see, Becky, the problem isn't really him. The problem is me. I could make a better choice. I have an old friend, Peter, who I know would be a much better choice. But I keep allowing this guy to account for so much of what I

think of myself. I allow him to make me feel valuable. And the bottom line is I know that's wrong. I would tell any friend of mine that's wrong. You either shave your legs or you don't.
(24)

In Scene 4 she learns that her "better choice," Peter, is gay. She punches him in the arm and says, "And that's for not being desperately and hopelessly in love with me" (30). It seems that Heidi will start looking to herself for the answers after this discovery, yet in Scene 5 at Scoop's wedding, it is apparent that she is still in love with Scoop even though she talks of an editor she is dating. In Act II, Scene 1 she mentions a man she almost married in England and it is evident that Heidi has not learned the lesson. In Scenes 2-5 Heidi appears to be unattached and there is hope once again for her to find comfort within herself, but she seems more depressed than ever before. She admits in Scene 5 that she has decided to move because her life in New York is not working: "I've been sad for a long time. I don't want to be sad anymore"(65). When it seems that she will emerge a hero after her move, she returns to New York, adopts a baby and dates another editor. Heidi has not taught us how to have it all and our skepticism is justified. We feel the "misery of changing sides" (Styan, *The Dark* 266) along with Heidi as she experiences the highs and lows throughout the twenty-four years depicted in the play.

In conclusion, this study has attempted to show that a particular style of dark comedy depicted American life and culture in the late twentieth century through the contributions of Wendy Wasserstein. The paper has endeavored to establish a theoretical framework of contemporary dark comedy by an analysis and comparison of works by twentieth century commentators on the genre, particularly Luigi Pirandello. Through this framework, the play of Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles*, has been examined and analyzed as a dark comedy. Wasserstein transformed the genre, made it suitable to her time and re-stated its significance as a method for revealing human frailty.

Works Cited

- Bentley, Eric *The Life of the Drama*. New York . Atheneum ,1964. Print.
- Bigsby, Christopher. *Contemporary American Playwrights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.
- Burke, Sally. *American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History*. New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1996. Print.
- Capp, Al "The Comedy of Charlie Chaplin." *Comedy : Meaning and Form* .Ed. Robert W. Corrigan. Scranton , Pennsylvania : Chandler Publishing Company, 1965. 219-119. Print.
- Gail Ciociola . *Wendy Wasserstein : Dramatizing Women, Their Choices and Their Boundaries*. North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1998. Print.
- "Delaware Humanities Forum 2001 Annual Lecture: Wendy Wasserstein."
- The Delaware Humanities Forum. 5 Oct.2001 www.dhf.org/lecture.htm .Web.
- Dictionary of Literary Biography*, volume 7, 1981. Print.
- Emerging Playwrights with Wendy Wasserstein and Corinne Jacker*. Dir. Bruce Goldfaden. Perf. Kim Beaty, Polly Draper, Winnie Holzman, Corinne Jacker,
- Wendy Wasserstein . Albany, New York : New York Network , 1985. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Jokes and the Comic". *Comedy: Meaning and Form*. Ed. Robert W. Corrigan. Scranton, Pennsylvania : Chandler Publishing

Company, 1965.253-262. Print.

Gussow, Mel. "Stage : New 'Romantic' by Wendy Wasserstein." Rev. of *Isn't It*

Romantic by Wendy Wasserstein . Playwright's Horizon, New York. *New York Times* 16 Dec. 1983:C3. Web.

Guthke, Karl S. *Modern Tragicomedy: An Investigation into the Nature of the Genre*. New York : Random House, 1966. Print.

Harper article "Drama Club" *Harper's Bazaar* Mar 2001: 334 . Print.

Hirst, David L. *The Critical Idiom: Tragicomedy*. New York: Methuen and Co.Ltd., 1984. Print.

Langer , Susan. "Te Comic Rhythm." *Comedy : Meaning and Form*. Ed. Robert W.

Corrigan. Scranton, Pennsylvania: Chandler Publishing Company, 1965. 119-140. Print.

Orr, John. *Tragicomedy and Contemporary Culture*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991. Print.

Pirandello, Luigi. *Naked Masks: Liola, It It So! (If You Think So), Henry IV, Six*

Characters in Search of an Author, Each In His Own Way. New York : Penguin Books, 1962. Print.

..... *On Humor* . Trans. Antonio Illiano and Daniel P. Testa. Chapel

Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1960. Print.

Plautus. *The Loeb Classical Library, Plautus , I*. Trans. Paul Nixon. London: Heinemann, 1916. Print.

Shakespeare, William . *Hamlet*. Ed. Edward Hubler. New York : The New American Library, Inc., 1963. Print.

Ayman Ibrahim Elhalafawy

Stein , Howard. "Wasserstein Reconsidered". *Theatre Week* 31
Oct. 1994:22-25.Web.

Styan, J. L. *The Dark Comedy*, 2nd ed. New York : Cambridge
University Press,1968. Print.

Wasserstein, Wendy *The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays*.
New York: RandomHouse, Inc.,1991. Print.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, MA: G and
C Merriam Co., 1979. Print.