

## **The Portrayal of Family and Self-reflexivity in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author***

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### **Abstract**

Luigi Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*) portrays numerous significant and functional characteristics of metatheatre, a concept coined by Lionel Abel. By drawing on such metatheatrical features and the play within a play technique, Pirandello's play presents six characters that are in search of an author. This study will, therefore, explain the concept of metatheatre and present a critical analysis of the play, *Six Characters* as a self-reflexive play. In this critical engagement with the text through specific references from the play and relevant secondary sources, important themes in the play such as reality and illusion, life, art, and the representation of the family in the play will be analysed. This analysis will ultimately demonstrate that Pirandello presents six characters that are self-conscious of their position as dramatic characters that manage to act out their roles, which actually reveal the family relationships between the characters.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, self-reflexivity, family, metatheatre.

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### **Luigi Pirandello'nun *Altı Karakter Yazarını Arıyor* Oyununda Aile ve Özdönüşümsellik Tartışması**

#### **Öz**

Luigi Pirandello'nun *Altı Karakter Yazarını Arıyor* (1921, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*) başlıklı oyunu, Lionel Abel tarafından ortaya atılan meta-tiyatro kavramının birçok önemli ve işlevsel özelliğini barındırmaktadır. Meta-tiyatronun böylesi özelliklerinden ve oyun içinde oyun tekniğinden yararlanan Pirandello'nun eseri, yazarını arayan altı karakteri yansıtmaktadır. Bu çalışma bu bağlamda öncelikle meta-tiyatro kavramını ve kavramın Pirandello'nun eserinde nasıl kullanıldığını açıklayarak *Altı Karakter*'in eleştirel bir incelemesini sunacaktır. Metnin eleştirel inceleme sürecinde birincil kaynaktan spesifik örneklerden ve konu ile ilgili ikincil kaynaklardan yararlanılacaktır. Bu noktada; gerçeklik ve hayal, yaşam, sanat ve ailenin temsili gibi oyunda önemli bir yere sahip temalar, çalışmanın tartışma kapsamı çerçevesinde ele alınacaktır. Çalışma, sonuç olarak Pirandello'nun rollerini yerine getirmeyi başaran ve konularının farkında olan altı karakter sunduğunu ve bu durumun aslında karakterler arasındaki aile ilişkilerini ortaya çıkardığını göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Luigi Pirandello, *Altı Karakter Yazarını Arıyor*, özdönüşümsellik, aile, meta-tiyatro.

## Extended Summary

The characteristics of metatheatre, a concept coined by Lionel Abel, can be observed in Luigi Pirandello's plays, especially his text, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) (*Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*). Pirandello's theatre is rich both intellectually and emotionally. His characters make use of their intellectual skill in their approach to an emotional problem. Furthermore, the mask becomes significant in Pirandellian theatre. Pirandello believes that people wear masks in this world. This becomes functional in concealing the undistorted disposition. Human identity is not one-sided because people are moulded into multiple personalities. Truth and falsehood cohabit and cannot be differentiated, as the world does not offer pure untwisted episteme. Instead, it pictures that truth and falsehood mingle. In this regard, Pirandello touches on the fragmented, split, and divided identities that are constructed by the society. Moreover, he also represents a lack of communication between the individual and the society as well as the desire to escape. This desire to escape from the restrictive boundaries of society may be due to the isolation and alienation of the individual. These problems are illustrated in his plays through dialogues and his unique style, which can be called as Pirandellism. In Pirandello's play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which draws on metatheatrical features and the play within a play technique, six characters that act their own scenes are in search of an author. There are seven characters in the play-within-the-play and fourteen members of the company. Some of them are in interaction with each other. The six characters consist of the father (*il padre*), the mother (*la madre*), the stepdaughter (*la figliastra*), the son (*il figlio*), the boy (*il giovinetto*), and the little girl (*la bambina*). The father and the stepdaughter are depicted as the spoke-persons of the group. This portrayal illustrates certain characteristics of metatheatre and how the family is depicted. The plot is complex and not so easy to comprehend. In this play, the focus is placed on the theatre and its process. A group of actors are rehearsing for Pirandello's play, *The Rules of the Game* (1918-

19) (*Il gioco delle parti*). They are interrupted by the arrival of six characters who assert that they are in search of an author whom they have lost. The father points out that they are the unfinished characters. Hence, they ask the director whether he can help them act their story. In addition, they are not sure about how the story should continue, as two different perspectives are offered, namely that of the father and of the stepdaughter. The father is willing to lecture throughout the play. His speech has eloquence and becomes almost philosophical at times. In this speech, he touches on theatre, the differences between a character and an actor, and the mask. Although he wishes to picture himself as a self-sacrificing father, the stepdaughter does not accept it. The stepdaughter in this respect presents another perspective. Her perspective has the potential to subvert the father's account of what has happened. The father attempts to justify his act and to reflect it as his own tragedy. However, this infuriates the stepdaughter. This study will, in this regard, give brief relevant information the concept of metatheatre and offer a critical analysis of Pirandello's play, *Six Characters as a self-reflexive play*. In this analysis, specific emphasis will be placed upon its themes such as the theatre of the theatre, life and art, and the representation of family in the play. This will ultimately indicate that Pirandello portrays six characters that are self-conscious of their position as dramatic characters who act out their roles, which disclose the family relationships between the characters.

## Introduction

The Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello, an influential figure in Italian drama and European drama, was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1934. His plays contain the characteristics of metatheatre, especially his play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) (*Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*). The play has six characters that are in search of an author. These characters act their own scenes, which reflect the elements of metatheatre and the depiction of family. This study will, in this regard, explain the concept of metatheatre and present a critical analysis of the play, *Six Characters* as a self-reflexive play with specific emphasis upon its themes such as the theatre of the theatre, life and art and the representation of the family in the play. This will ultimately demonstrate that Pirandello presents six characters that are self-conscious of their position as dramatic characters who manage to act out their roles, which actually reveal the family relationships between the characters.

## Metatheatre

The term metatheatre, was coined by the American playwright and theatre critic Lionel Abel. Rani states that it is “a dramatic device that attempts to expose theatre as the subterfuge it is, with all its sincerities, pretensions and intrinsic ‘theatricality’. It disrupts any illusion of reality that the dramatic action on stage might perpetuate and reinforces the artifice and fiction of the play” (2011: 496). Thus, it is possible to point out that metatheatre blurs the line between reality and illusion, thereby leading the spectator to believe in the reality of illusion because the element of illusion is not presented as artificial and unreliable, as can be seen in *Six Characters*. The characters are self-conscious, which might cause the disruption of the illusion of reality.

In relation to the significance of the characters’ self-consciousness, Abel in *Tragedy and Metatheatre: Essays on Dramatic Form* comments as follows:

[T]he plays I am pointing at do have a common character: all of them are theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized. By this I mean that the persons appearing on the stage in these plays are there not simply because they were caught by the playwright in dramatic postures as a camera might catch them, but because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them. What dramatized them originally? Myth, legend, past literature, them themselves... unlike figures in tragedy, they are aware of their own theatricality. (2003: 134-35)

These plays deal with life, which is regarded as already theatricalized. The persons that appear on the stage are not unconscious; on the contrary, they are highly aware of their theatricality. Furthermore, metatheatre uses the device, the play within a play. In this regard, the plays of Genet, Brecht and Pirandello reflect such self-referentiality and theatricality. Puchner aptly comments on this point as follows: “Nineteenth-century realism and naturalism thus are for modern drama what Greek tragedy is for baroque drama, namely, the ‘realist’ precursor of the later self-absorbed metatheatre,” which accentuates the fact that metatheatre is referred to as self-absorbed, self-referential and self-conscious (2003: 14).

Abel touches upon the differentiation between comedy and humour while explaining the concept, metatheatre. In *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form*, he denotes that “events in comedy are reduced by humour to examples for reflection and are not irrevocable, as in tragedy. Nor do characters in comedy have to convince us they exist; all they have to do is to make us laugh” (1963: 58). The main aim of the characters in comedy is to make the spectator laugh; however, once it is filled with humour, the spectators are made to reflect on what lies beneath a comic scene.

The world is likened to a play. It is a play, in which people act their parts. They come to the stage, act their parts and go off the stage in the Shakespearean sense. In this respect, the world is like a dream and illusion. Metatheatre spotlights this confusion between the illusion and reality of life, on which O'Connor comments as follows:

Abel's concept of metatheatre is founded upon the view that life has already been theatricalised, even before the dramatist's imagination begins to act on the raw material of life. This theatricalization inexorably links illusion and unreal-

ity to life, a life in which characters have full self-consciousness of their own dramatic posture. This attitude is principally revealed in six ways: 1) there is an essential illusoriness in life; 2) there is a loss of reality for the world; 3) the world cannot be proved to exist; 4) there is a lack of implacable values; 5) life is a dream; 6) the world is a stage. The latter two are the manifestations we are accustomed to seeing, but the former are the bases and premises upon which they are constructed. (1975: 275)

As can be deduced from O'Connor's remarks, the characters here have self-awareness, which is brought to light through these six ways.

### **Pirandello's Theatre and Metatheatre**

Pirandello's drama signifies "a fresh vein of theatre . . . metatheatre: theatre which makes its audience conscious of the theatre's own element in order to work" (Styan 1998: 143). In addition, Pirandello is also influenced by realism and naturalism in his plays. In relation to this influence, Farrell set forth that "Pirandello's early writings were in line with a style of writing, particularly strong in Sicily, known as *verismo*, which may be regarded as the Italian variant of European realism or naturalism" (2004: xxiii). Thus, it is evident that the contextual developments and movement have an influence over his style.

In this regard, it is possible to observe certain impacts of realism in Pirandello's plays, especially in *Six Characters*. Farrell states that the play-within-a-play and the inner play have elements of realism: the story that the characters experience is similar to the plots in realist drama; certain aspects of life are questioned; and there is a power struggle between the father and the director or producer (2004: xxviii). Farrell further comments on this point as follows:

The characters' rejected story is in many ways a 'realist' tale, but it comes wrapped in the 'philosophical' tale of their quest for life. The characters tell a tale of dysfunctional family, a recurring theme of realist drama, whose behavior clashed with the laws of secular and religious society. The family's own seething dissatisfaction with itself... contribute[s] to its implosion and self-destruction. (2004: xxviii)

Thus, it is obvious that Pirandello, who “employed introspective narrative,” is affected by realism, the traces of which can be observed in *Six Characters* (Kundakçı 1990:181)<sup>1</sup>. However, he later deviates from “naturalist realism in favor of artistic and dramatic self-consciousness” (Bassanese 1997: 17).

Moreover, Pirandello's theatre is rich both emotionally and intellectually. His characters use their intellectual skill while approaching an emotional problem. In addition, the mask gains significance in Pirandellian theatre. The mask is “a linguistic concept, each mask a surface on which an individual writes the text he will present to the world” (Marranca 1983: 12). For Pirandello, it is not possible to pull off the mask and to establish truth. He believes that people wear masks in this world, which conceal the true nature. People are moulded into various, multiple personalities. Human identity is not one-sided. Truth and falsehood cohabit and cannot be differentiated. The world does not present pure truth or fact, but, instead, it presents a mingling of truth and falsehood. In this respect, Pirandello talks about the split, fragmented, and divided identities constructed by the society. He also presents a lack of communication between the individual and the society as well as a yearning for escapism. This desire to escape from the society might result from the alienation and isolation of the individual. These problems are reflected in his plays through dialogues and his peculiar style, which can be called as Pirandellism.

### ***Six Characters in Search of an Author***

The play *Six Characters* presents the story of six characters that are in search of an author. The plot is complex and difficult to understand with its focus on the theatre and its process. A group of actors are rehearsing for Pirandello's play, *The Rules of the Game* (1918-19) (*Il gioco delle parti*); however, they are interrupted by the arrival of six characters that claim to be in search of an author whom they have lost. The father tells that they are the unfinished characters; therefore, they ask the director whether he can help them act their story. Moreover, they are unsure about how the story should go on since there are two different perspectives, namely that of the father and of the stepdaughter.

The director does not welcome their story in the beginning, but is gradually

<sup>1</sup> The quotation has been translated by the author.



taken aback by the story. There are two different perspectives presented. The first one belongs to the father. For him, it is the story of his tragedy, whereas for the stepdaughter, it is the story of her violation by the father and of her desire for revenge. The story presented implicates that the father encourages his wife to elope with his male secretary with whom the mother has fallen in love. The eldest son stays with the father. The mother establishes a new life with the secretary and has three children. During this time, the father does not totally leave the family, but continues seeing and meeting other children and giving them presents. However, once the family moves from the city to another one, the father loses track of them.

The plot of the play continues with the returning of the family to the city. After a couple of years, the family returns to the city upon the death of the secretary. They are now poor and look for a job. The mother finally finds a job at Madame Pace's dress shop, but she does not become aware that M. Pace wants to exploit her daughter as a prostitute. One day, the father goes to the brother and M. Pace presents him the daughter, yet he does not know the reality. Just as he begins to seduce the daughter, the mother walks in and shouts at the scene she witnesses. The reality is revealed and the father feels very embarrassed. Then, he welcomes his old family to live with him and his son. This decision does not make the son happy because he regards the mother and children as strangers trespassing on his personal life.

The director here takes the role of the author and the scene when the father meets the stepdaughter at the dress shop is acted. The actors begin to act these parts, but their acting does not satisfy the characters, especially the father and the stepdaughter because it is not realistic in their opinion. Thus, the important episodes are "re-enacted by the tormented and disputing characters in order to show the actors what the story is" (Fergusson 1949: 187). The father and the stepdaughter are given the opportunity to conclude the scene rather than the actors. Then, the setting is changed for the second scene. In this scene, although the mother wants to talk to the son, he refuses her. During their talk or quarrel, the little girl is drowned in the fountain and the boy commits suicide by shooting himself with a revolver. In the end, the director cannot decide whether it has been real or not. The play ends with the director's call for an end of the rehearsal.

There are seven characters in the play-within-the-play and fourteen members of the company. Some of them interact with each other. The six characters are the father (*il padre*), the mother (*la madre*), the stepdaughter (*la figliastra*), the son (*il figlio*), the boy (*il giovinetto*), and the little girl (*la bambina*). The father and the stepdaughter seem to be the spoke-persons of the group. The father is eager to lecture in the play. His speech is eloquent and almost philosophical at times. He talks about theatre, the differences between a character and an actor, and the mask. Although he desires to present himself as self-sacrificing and altruistic, this is not accepted by the stepdaughter.

Moreover, the mother is denied the role of a free woman, as her position is fixed as a mother. She cannot go beyond that position. Her act of falling in love with the secretary is not accepted by the father and she is then sent away with the secretary. She is more like a passive and submissive mother: "You have the words. I don't. But believe me, sir, after he married me—who knows why (I was a poor, simple woman)" (Pirandello 1983: 222). As can be seen, she does not rebel; on the contrary, she conforms to the patriarchy. Once she transgresses her traditional gender role, the father cannot tolerate it and thus sends her away with her lover. Hence, she is denied the sexual pleasure, as she is expected to become only a mother, a wife, and a sexual object.

The stepdaughter narrates a different perspective that undermines the father's account of what has happened. The father tries to justify his act and to show it as his own tragedy; however, the stepdaughter is irritated at him. She is seduced by him at Madame Pace's dress shop and yearns for revenge. She calls the father a beast: "When anyone tries to simplify life---by reducing it to the level of beasts, for example---and he throws out all the human encumbrances of aspiration, innocence, all sense of the ideal . . . Crocodile tears!" (Pirandello 1983: 226). As can be seen, she does not trust in the father's tears and for her, as he has lost all the sense of decency and duty.

The relationship among the characters reflects how family is represented in the play, as the characters are defined in terms of their family role. Outside their family roles, they do not have any other identity. This shows that their identities are "bound up in their relationships to each other which confers on them a fixity

and a typicality undermining individuality” (Caesar 1998: 62). The father denies the womanhood of the mother by stating that she is a mother not a woman. The daughter can be taken as a reaction against patriarchy and suppression, but the male dominance still seems to be in the foreground, as the father is the voice of the dominant discourse and patriarchal ideology. Whatever he does, he is not accused of, but the stepdaughter is the one to challenge and to refute his way of accounting what has happened. The father is the leading character of the group, as his power is felt by the other characters. This is evident even from the lines he has uttered. The father utters 283 lines, whereas the mother utters only 25 lines. Moreover, it is the father who speaks most frequently. He has 78 turns, whereas the mother has 19 turns (Günsberg 1994: 155). Even the dialogues demonstrate the dominance of the male over the female. The father’s “voyeurism” is not criticized, but the mother is criticized severely (Bassnett 1994: 22).

*Six Characters* as a play in this respect presents self-conscious characters, who interact with each other and know that they are characters. They comment on the fact that art is immortal, whereas life is transient. In addition, they have a yearning to play their part, which is understood by the father’s following remarks: “The drama is in us; it is us. And we’re impatient to play it; a passion drives us to it” (Pirandello 1983: 218). The father tries to persuade the director to let them play their role. As can be observed, the group is well aware of their position as dramatic characters.

These characters have an existence that is independent from the author. In relation to this point, Heffner comments on it as follows: “[C]haracters have an independent existence apart from the author who conceives them, can come upon a stage of their own volition, interrupt a rehearsal, demand to act out their fragmentary story, and argue with live human beings the nature of personality and existence” (1957: 33). At the beginning of the play, when the characters interrupt the rehearsal, they are free from the constraints of the author. Paolucci in *Pirandello’s Theatre: The Recovery of the Modern Stage for Dramatic Art* states that they are “independent creations seeking expression within an inadequate world” (2002: 49). The father and the stepdaughter talk to the director in order to act out their story. The father even begins to lecture about the nature of existence and

personality: “Each of us in many persons, many, depending on all the possibilities for being within us. For this man we’re one person, for that one another. We’re multiple. Yet we live with the illusion that we’re the same for everyone—always the same person in everything we do” (Pirandello 1983: 227). He talks eloquently and touches on the multiplicity of the human identity, which causes a mingling of fact and fiction.

The play in this respect reflects the contrast between the life of a man and the life of a character. The father accordingly claims the following: “A character, dear sir, can always ask a man who he is. Because a character truly has a life of his own, one stamped by his own specific traits, traits which always declare he’s “somebody.” While a man—I’m not speaking of you now---a man, so-to-speak in general, can be ‘nobody’” (Pirandello 1983: 248). A character can have an identity and become somebody, whereas a person cannot become somebody because his existence is transient and temporary. The existence of the characters is fixed and unchanging. The father accordingly sets forth: “Because what you are breathing and touching today—like yesterday’s reality—is sure to seem an illusion tomorrow” (Pirandello 1983: 248).

Furthermore, *Six Characters* challenges the power and authority struggle between the character and the author, the character and the director. In relation to this point, Balamir points out that Pirandello’s purpose in writing this play was “to analyse the circumstances, the operation of theatre as well as ‘author, actor/actress, director, and audience’” (2010:29)<sup>2</sup>. Thus, Pirandello makes the spectator re-think about their ingrained notions and perceptions. Paolucci in *The Plays and Fiction of Luigi Pirandello* asserts that “[h]is plays, in fact, force us to reconsider things that are taken for granted, to turn the obvious into an unknown quantity to be scrutinized and evaluated before it can be accepted as part of our conscious world (2009: 79). Traditionally, it is the author that has the sole authority and manipulative power, but Pirandello draws a different picture through this self-reflexive play, which leads one to question and re-judge his/her fixed, stable ideas.

Stage directions are also very functional in the play. They give information about the setting, time, and the characters. The characters are described through

<sup>2</sup> The quotation has been translated by the author.

stage directions as follows: “[The stepdaughter] is contemptuous of the air of timidity, distress, and lostness of her younger brother, a dreary child of fourteen, also dressed in black” (Pirandello 1983: 215). Light is of importance as well, as light goes on and goes off. Through stage directions, how this play should be performed is conveyed: “Whoever wishes to undertake a production of this play should use every device available to set the six characters off from the actors of the company” (214). Moreover, the technique of the play adds to its originality. Lucas argues that “[t]he real originality of *Six Characters* lies in its technique—a novel series of tricks, which begins with the audience finding that the curtain, instead of rising before them, is raised already” (1963: 413). Hence, it requires the spectator to be alert since it is complex and difficult to follow.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that certain themes such as reality and illusion, art and life, theatre of the theatre, family life, patriarchy, and the power of art play a pivotal role in Luigi Pirandello’s play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, which “embodies not only the paradox of art against life, fixity and happening. It also presents the tension between a play of abundant verbal expression and one that is reduced to a photographic fragment” (1998: 181). The play is full of verbal expressions and dialogues, which contribute to the communication of these themes.

In this self-reflexive play, Pirandello, a highly influential figure in both Italian drama and European drama, reflects the features of metatheatre by making the spectator conscious of the theatre’s own process, as has been highlighted throughout this study via specific references from the play and from the secondary relevant sources. All in all, it can be argued that Pirandello’s *Six Characters* presents six characters whose acting out their roles as dramatic characters ultimately divulges the interfamily relationships between these self-conscious characters.

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