

**Metatheater: Illusion and Reality in Luigi Pirandello's
Six Characters in Search of an Author**

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المستخلص

يشير مفهوم ما بعد المسرح الى قدرة النص عكس نصيته اي ان يجعل القاريء او المشاهد مدركا الى انه يتعامل مع نص مؤلف وليس الحياة الواقعية. ان ما بعد المسرح احد ادوات الحداثة في تغريب القاري وتحتيم الوهم الذي يخلقة النص الواقعي في ذهن القاري او المشاهد مما يخلق لديه وعيا يمكنه من استجلاء تعقيدات الحياه الحقيقية. تعد مسرحية ست شخصيات تبحث عن مؤلف للكاتب الحداثوي الايطالي لويجي بيراندلو احد ابرز نماذج ما بعد المسرح. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على مدى اندماج الوهم والخيال والحقيقة وكيفية تأثيرها في فهم المتلقي في مسرحية بيراندلو تلك

الكلمات الرئيسية: ما بعد المسرح ، المسرح الأوربي ، المسرحية ضمن المسرحية

Abstract

Metatheater is a reference to the self-reflexivity of the dramatic text. It is a modernist device used to shatter the illusion that the text confers on the audience or the reader by calling his/her attention to the fact that this is not reality but a textual construction. This interplay of reality and illusion in Metatheater is meant to explore the complexity of the modern life. Major among the plays in this type of drama is Luigi Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author. It illuminates the fusion of illusion and reality by exploring the metatheatrical device which is play within a play and try to touch the metaphysical imagination of the audience. How the audience will experience Metatheater by feeling the boundaries between illusion and reality.

Keywords: Metatheater, European drama, Play within play

Drama has changed over ages. Modern drama has re-evaluated the aesthetics spreading in Western thought. Many playwrights and thinkers believe that illusion or artificiality is a need to comprehend the complexity of modern world, where the individual perspective has been

defined as fragmented and illusory. There is a need to represent reality through artificiality to provide an insight to see the truth of human mind and to illuminate the individual perspective. Metatheatre is an artistic way to examine the interaction between illusion and reality. It has continued to provide insights into how such a fragmented perspective effects and is translated into action. Reality in metatheatre is the illogical world we understand through experiential experience which exists in our comprehension of it. This study shows how metatheatre strengthens the stage fiction with the reflection of the theatrical form beyond spectators as performance or staging script in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. It illuminates the fusion of illusion and reality by exploring the metatheatrical device which is play within a play and try to touch the metaphysical imagination of the audience. How the audience will experience metatheatre by feeling the boundaries between illusion and reality.

K. Ferlic who is a mystic and an energy physicist, tries to show the essence of metatheatre in relation to human nature. He thinks that the power of metatheatre is in providing a way to see the illusion of mind. He argues that the reality we experience is often only an illusion because we do not always see or know the real truth. We live in an illusion of reality and our response to the world we experience based on our perception which is based on the experiences we have had. He expresses that if we respond to our role in the theatrical performance, an illusion, as if it is real we can see the reality of our consciousness. We would see the reality of our being and how we perceive the world. We would see the illusion created by our mind. He believes that metatheatre can reveal any aspects of our being that we closed. (2005 -1) Gain-Paolo Biasin, states that any single performance which reveals the artifice of the play calls into the mind the illusion of the reality of the performance in general and this effects on the audience's perceptions. Metadramatic performance or metadramatic moment is a mirror held up to nature. It brings illusion and reality into a play and shows different level of fictions or illusion

which function as a "consecutive mirrors in which the reciprocal images of form-meaning and sign-referent are annulled".(1999-59) By a device like play within a play, which dwells there between the boundaries of illusion and reality, the play takes the spectator's attention to a pure self-consciousness.

The play within the play is often used by playwrights to reveal the workings of dramatic irony and the very nature of drama. It may come in a variety of forms either as a form of irony disguised in simple performance of the play itself, a character masquerading as another character, a character pretend to be out of mind or a complex fusion of theatrical realities. All these forms of play within a play carry a paradoxical significance in theory and practice and rely on a self-conscious writing process on the playwright's part and the self reflexive aspect of performance itself.(Fischer et al, ed.-2007-15) Pirandello's use of play within play technique is his famous device but for him it is more than just effective theatrical device. It reflects his idea about whole nature of the theatre and its evolution in the future. Antonia Zbranek Smolen explains that Pirandello reflects his thought about the nature of theatre by letting the audience in on the secrets of the theatre, by allowing them to see how they are being deceived and their emotion are being manipulated through sheer stage effect and see theatre as it is really is. For him the device play within a play is a form of life. By allowing the audience some part in drama and educating them recognize illusion versus reality on the stage. He does not only want to expose theatre but also to free it. His theatre is not trying to convince the audience that it is anything but a theatre and the drama does not have to follow any convention or rules in reality.

Six Characters in Search of an Author is the greatest dramatic play by Pirandello. Its premiere was in Rom, 1921. It was a revolutionary play that was not accepted by the audience. According to Stephan Mulrine in his introduction to the play, it "infuriated the Roman audience to such an extent that it was almost booed off the stage, with cries of

'Manicomio!', and Pirandello barely escaped the theater without injury." (2003- xviii) Felicity Firth also describes the reaction of the Roman audience: "The play's formlessness, its lack of a sequential plot, its complete break with the patterns and structures of a traditional theatre, caused fighting in the streets of Rome on its first night." (2001-487) Traditionally, the audience would have had to accept the pretense that the stage was in fact not a stage, but rather whatever it was supposed to represent a kitchen, a bedroom, a street, etc. Pirandello takes such a convention and twists its original purpose by having the audience accept the stage as just that a wooden plank upon which actors are actors and not. He uses this format to raise questions within the audience as to how and where illusion ends and reality begins. The play's translator, Eric Bentley credits Pirandello as being the first playwright to actually use the stage as a stage , no other location is depicted, there is no other reality, we simply experience the reality of the actors who have no character to play. The stage is empty, only the stories of the people on the stage exist. It's been said that this stage and vision reflect a blank sheet of paper the stage itself has become the blank sheet of paper on which the writer will write. (1925-209)The audience see a stage which is not actually present, on which there are actors who are not actors. When the characters enter the theatre and approach the director and the actors as real human beings, the actors and the director in an empty stage getting ready for rehearsal. It is an attempt to reflect his idea about the concept of illusion and reality. The contrast of illusion and reality is an operating technique in this play. The distinction between illusion and reality is established in the very beginning of the play. Pirandello makes the audience involve in his hallucinatory reality as the audience never sees that play; rather, as the characters try to explain themselves, to show the Director and the Actors what their story is in an effort to convince them to turn it into a play. Michael Jonathan Subialka states that the audience is given fragments of their story, each one from a different Character's perspective. The play within the play is thus incomplete. But from what is presented, the audience is able to discern certain, key facts about the Characters' story.

(2012-44) The Father leaves the Mother after having sent the Son to the countryside to a wet nurse. The mother is in love with a man who works for the Father; the Father disappears from their lives, and the Mother has three new children with this new lover – the Stepdaughter, the Boy, and the Child. While the family lives in poverty, the Stepdaughter becomes a prostitute for Madame Pace, who owns the shop where the Mother works as a seamstress. One day, unfortunately the Father comes into Madame Pace's shop for the Stepdaughter's services. After the Father discovers the desperate situation of his wife, he has her and their family come back to his house to live with him. But they can not be happy: the Son hates them all, having been separated from them for years; the Stepdaughter's relationship with the Father is a mess, and she eventually runs away; the youngest children both die tragically at home, the Child drowns right in front of the Boy, who then shoots himself with a revolver. The play is created to confuse the difference between stage illusion and real life, thus making the play more realistic; in essence, to make the play within the play seem more real.

Abel thinks that *Six Characters in Search of an Author* 'perhaps the most original play-within-a-play written in the twentieth century' (Abel 2003, 136) He utilizes the technique play within the play to show within the performance of the play, a creation and presentation of another version of reality. The six characters, with masks coming on the stage while at the same time another play is in making. The characters claim that they are incomplete because the author did not finish his work. As the characters start to tell their story there are some challenges occurring between characters and actors in which the identity of the characters and actors are revealed through the contrast between illusion and reality. The actors start playing the role of the characters but in a crucial scene the characters object that they are not represented fairly. The producer tries to change few details. The leading actress says that the

audience today are not good at accepting theatrical illusion as in old days. The Father objects at the word "illusion" and considers it a cruel word:

PRODUCER: What are we supposed to say? Illusion is our stock-in-trade [...] [...]

FATHER: I entirely understand [...] As artists [...], you have to create a perfect illusion of reality.

PRODUCER: That's right.

FATHER: But what if you stop to consider that we, the six of us (he gestures briefly to indicate the six characters) have no other reality; that we don't exist outside this illusion!

Pericles Lewis says that "the fictional characters come to life and insist on their own rights, seeking to dismantle the illusion of reality in favor of reality itself, or rather in favor of illusion itself, which is their only reality." (2010-177) The characters' view toward each other vary depending on their circumstance. Here Pirandello asks the audience to recognize the different levels of reality present on the stage. The theater as a physical space, including sets constructed by a crew; the written text of the play; the actors' performance; and the represented reality of the characters' lives, which are usually fictional, evoke the audience to investigate the state in which it becomes difficult to discern life from art and illusion from reality.

Luca Tosadori explains that Pirandello has created characters who have their own lives. They are so real that they have come out of the written text. Pirandello maintained that it is impossible to separate a character from the context in which he is put. He is part of a universe and is not created ongoing, but appears to the author as a definite entity, with own feelings, experiences and ideas. The only trouble is that a character is bound to his story and he is but a senseless figure if left outside it. (2013-4) The six characters seem to be unsatisfied. They perfectly know they

will never fill the void, yet they ask the producer to complete their story in order to find a temporary relief .

PRODUCER [...] But what do you want here?

FATHER We wish to live, sir!

PRODUCER (ironically) Through all eternity?

FATHER No sir; just a moment...in you.

Tosadori, adds that Pirandello, lingers on the impossibility to represent real life on stage. This is because we are all characters who live in the theatre of life. We may feel original and independent from one another, but we are condemned to wear different masks depending on the context in which we are plunged. Without these external protections we are lost. (2013-4)

Scott Nelson states that the family knows who the original author is and, after having tried without success to convince him to finish their story. The Stepdaughter clearly expresses the confusion and frustration that the family feels in their desperate attempts to convince the author to finish their story This is the situation in which the six characters find themselves. They are creations of an author who has decided not to develop their story and these Six Characters are trapped in a type of limbo, unable to be a part of a complete literary work and unable to reach truth. They are forced to develop themselves or deal with their lack of development and to create their own reality in a word where they do not belong. (2011-57) The six characters are already in possession of the essence of a text, a complete narrative and detailed sense of themselves and their memories. What they lack, famously, is an Author, a figure who can both legitimize them by making them text, and, paradoxically, free them from the confines of textuality by making them available to the expansive imaginations of readers and audience. (Ariel Watson-2008-128) Pirandello's characters, like Shakespeare's, dramatize the very act of both creating art and operating on the potentialities of their beings. While

trying to survive in a physical universe that is not of their own creation, they still take responsibility for those drives that make their survival possible. (Caroline Patey, et le. -2014- 105)

Robert Burstein states that the characters assert their reality over the actor's reality as the self is not stable, changes with the time and develops new experience. Thus art is more real than life because it is not subject to changes like life. Pirandello like many thinkers in his time, believes that truth is relative depending on a person's situation; the illusory meaning of what is real is different for different people. Robert Burstein holds, Pirandello believes in the existence of objective truth. Though he illustrates that how this truth cannot be grasped by human's mind because it is in a continual state of change and changes with each individual.(1991-175) The Father reflects Pirandello's idea that the characters who have no other reality, "Born a live they wished to live" (Pirandello, 1925- 7). They have the life of their own which is distinguished by unique characteristics which do not change over time. He believes that truth exists in them not in the Director or the actors whose identity is ever changing. The Director does not see himself the same way as he had perceived during another time in the past. This notion presents a paradox in which Pirandello is ultimately outlining the absurd nature of truth; the search for meaning where there is no meaning. This is a representation of uncertainty. They are searching for the truth that does not exist because the notion of truth is relative in itself.

Gain-Paolo Biasin explains that the metadramatic practice is appeared through calling into the play the relationship between stage fiction and reality by neutralizing simulation through a multiplication of the levels of simulation. The actors of the play are confronted with the characters that have come to life. Pirandello tries to make the audience agree that those characters have been simulated from real people. He evokes the audience to recognise who is more real, the characters or the actors. The multiplication of the levels of simulation becomes the typical

content of metatheatres which means that the theatre is a "reflection which leads beyond the mirror" (Biasin, et al., 1999)¹ Metatheatres support theatre and simulation with the reflection of theatrical forms as performance beyond audience.

Douglas Clayton says that one of the issues that Pirandello raises in his metatheatrical play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is the contrast between a theatrical reality which is marked as real although it is conventional and that which is marked as unconventional. Clayton partially disagrees with those who say that the real characters in *Six Characters* function as real material in Picasso collage and sees this conflict of the real and conventional as an essence of Pirandello's play. Clayton argues that in drama even that which is considered as real is in fact conventional, a sign that standing for the real which is always absent from the stage. For instance the six characters represented by actors not by themselves. He believes that the real is constantly receding the fictional. (1993-166)

Mehdi Sepehrmanesh argues Pirandello blurs the borderline between reality and illusion by mingling them and to create a diversity of perceptions for his readers and audience. The relativity, indeterminacy and polyphony that exist in his play do not let the readers or the audience to grasp any solid truth or firm meaning out of it. (2014- 233-249 In one part of the play, the actors are going to make the stage as the workshop of the *Madam Pace*. However, that does not seem much like reality. At this time, in a metatheatrical moment, the boundaries between real context and performance, the Father furnishes the stage by using the hats and clothes of the actors like that of *Madam Pace* trade in order to show the reality of their drama. He sets the scene by means of the actors' stuff in order to make *Madam Pace* appear on the stage. *Madam Pace* comes on the stage and suddenly all the actors get shocked by this scenery and argue that this is a trick. The Father claims that this is a real situation and the actors cannot play it since the actors pretend to be real and want to appear real through make up but we, as characters, are real and need no

pretention. The actors perceive the presence of Madam Pace on the stage as pure illusion whereas the characters see it as pure reality. As soon as The daughter sees Madam Pace, she goes to her as a person really existing while the actors on the stage observe her as a trick made by the father. Each group on the stage has a contrasting idea toward the appearance of Madam Pace. The identity of Madam Pace is floating as being the reality or illusion. However, both of them are true in their observation toward her as Modern Physics argues that everyone can have his or her view of reality. Michael L. Green states that Pirandello in his plays questions the objective or scientific observation as a means of ascertaining truth , his characters as well are put in a situation to challenge the meaning of truth and illusion. (2002-446)

Nietzsche's e Gay Science argues about aspects of the absurd which are incredibly resonant with Pirandello's theatre. Things have more than one value, or face ; they may appear to have different, even contradictory, faces to us, depending on the standpoint we take in knowing and judging them. There is a considerable contrast and tension between what we consciously believe or assume about ourselves, and what we really are. Precisely this currently unconscious tension between our surface beliefs and our underlying truth is fundamentally comic, this is the comedy of existence. Laughing is the response to recognizing this inner tension : "Laughter may yet have a future. [...] Perhaps laughter will then have formed an alliance with wisdom, perhaps only a gay science will then be left" (Kathleen Marie Higgins- 2000- 47) In *Six Characters in Search of an Author* the conflict of the realities, the reality of the actors, the reality of the playwright, the reality of the characters and the reality of the audience can be seen as the expression of the modernist world in which all is subjective and relative.

Rasha Dwood explains that the inner play of Pirandello's metadrama is utilized by presenting contradictory levels of language which expose the distance between illusion and reality. A central theme throughout *Six*

Characters is the difficulty of human communication. The real drama of the family is not the tragic story they try to tell, but the fact that they cannot share their suffering with other people. (2014-100) Umberto Mariani shows how the difference between the naturalistic language and of the six characters' melodramatic story and the conceptual language they use in their conversation with the manager. Such contrast reveals the triviality of their imaginary narrative compared to the more profound and vital desire to communicate with the world and be real characters rather than thoughts within an author mind. (1991-203)

Communication has broken down not only among characters but between characters, actors, directors and audience. The result is a chaos of petting realities in which all are at cross purposes. The climax point for instance the shot at the end of the play happens ironically in unexpected way. Dawood argues that Pirandello's metadrama extends beyond using contradictory levels of language. It exposes the distance between the imaginary characters' melodramatic story and their existential dilemma. Dawood believes that Pirandello utilised parody to attack aspects of theatrical representation within the inner play of his metadrama. When the step daughter accuses the absent author of creating the six characters to be able as miserable as the popular theatre might do in order to attract and satisfy the dominant audience's test. She argues that Pirandello's play attacks melodramatic features, which are parodied throughout the play. Pirandello tends to generate the audience's sympathy with dramatic characters suffering. (2014, P.101)

Ariel Watson argues that whether *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is a farce or a melodrama, it does not fail to absorb the audience despite many interruptions and disruptions of suspense. It is clear that the play will end with a tragedy but how this end will be, is the question. The characters argue amongst themselves about the exact nature of the narrative's events, and with the Manager about the ideal theatrical manner of presenting them, so the revelation of details occurs at the right moment.

The narrative turning back on itself in negotiation as often as it progresses. The curious sense of simultaneity that results from this narrative is part of Pirandello's metatheatrical project to crush the boundaries between illusion and reality. In the final moments of *Six Characters* Pirandello uses the curious simultaneity of rehearsal – the coexistence and struggle of multiple identities for a single artistic self, to show differences between reality and illusion. When, at the Manager's insistence, the tragic events of the Characters' lives are played out by them on the bare stage, the theatrical company's persistent belief that these are real people, rather than fictional beings, is put to the test. Even the Actors who witness the final tragedy, the suicide of the speechless Boy Character, are not sure whether he is really dead or just acting. These characters exist in a sort of pretextual limbo, neither real nor fictional but rather simply true, a truth not subject to the temporal and spatial laws of fact. (2008 -128-9) Mihaela Martinescu states that for Pirandello "Reality, once perceived, filtered and interpreted, becomes an illusion. (2013- 153)

Subialka shows that in this complex play within a play, the chaos and confusion about what is real and what is fictional takes on particular tragedy for the audience on account of Pirandello's technique of simultaneously evoking a sense of order where fiction is hierarchically separated from reality and also destabilizing that sense of order. The very nature of the play within the play already evokes some such notion: the Characters' story conforms, as has often been noted, to the types of realist, bourgeois theatre. One of the assumptions of such realism is precisely that the fictional world is valuable insofar as it represents the real world. While the borders of a fictional world can indeed extend beyond a particular historical moment in the actual world, the Characters' story evokes an aesthetic framework that circumscribes those borders by locating the truth of fiction in its reference to the actual. (2012 - 46) Smolen argues that Pirandello attempts in this way to influence what is "seen and heard in the actual theatrical performance of his play as well as its philosophical tone." (2014 -115) Brustein states that Pirandello's

objective reality is virtually inaccessible, it is "the illusion making faculty of the subjective mind." (1991- 171) This paradoxical nature of reality is existential and can only be experienced rather than lived concretely.

Pirandello wants to challenge the audience view of reality and illusion, both inside and outside the theatre by presenting a performance which is both realistic and absurd at the same time. Pirandello is experimenting with the connection between what people perceive to be reality, which, evidently turns out to be an illusion. He stresses the role of perception and awareness in experiencing this essentially existential reality which exceeds the limits of the human mind. The dramatic text is no longer a site for the construction of an alternative reality. The blurring of the boundaries between the real and the illusory is Pirandello's ultimate textual tactic to highlight the phenomenality of external reality.

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