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Manifestation of MetaTheatre in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Ms Aakshi Srivastava, Dept. of English, AIESR, Noida (Uttar Pradesh), India

Abstract

Luigi Pirandello's seminal play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* serves to dismantle the conventional undercurrents immersed in the theatrical canon of linear plots, evolving characters and vivid settings. In layman's terms, Meta Theatre refers to the multiplicity of narrative, evolution of spectacle and characters independent of the plot, but even more essential to its culmination. In *Six Characters*, the establishment of meta theatre arises from the subjective interpretations of the Characters upon their own nature and their diatribe against the Actors of the company. Opening stage directions indicate a stressed undertone placed upon the ambivalent and minimalist fabrication of the play in making. Pirandello's main implication suggests that the empirical juxtaposition between the farcical actors and the Characters performs as an ontological manifestation of his Meta theatre; a self referential drama. Furthermore, this play draws attention to the aesthetic narratology of Pirandello as the Characters gradually subvert their 'hyperreality' and transcend into full fledged individuals capable of selective opinions. Pirandello succeeds in this by interweaving elements of dramatic irony, Italian neorealism, the contorted narrativization of a script and deconstructing patriarchal hierarchy within the family dynamics of modern society. This paper seeks to investigate Pirandello's metaphysical rhetoric as he ventures to deconstruct society's farcical grasp of reality, which he demonstrates through his subversion of the arbitrary norms of Commedia dell'Arte.

Key Words: MetaTheatre, Hyperreality, Commedia dell'Arte, narratology, Characters, Actors, Existential dilemma, dramatic irony, patriarchy, Italian drama, surrealism.

1. Disassociation of Reality

Modern European Drama encompasses a plethora of cultural fluctuations, fragmentation of plot, and the transformation of the theatrical space from a mimetic sphere of reality to a verisimilitude dramatic cohesion. From the alienation effect in Brecht's plays to the abstract use of the avant-garde movement, the evolution of European drama features a myriad of experimentation, philosophical speculations and the breakdown of the 'fourth wall' in plays. Indeed, the plays written by Luigi Pirandello significantly illustrate the evolved

paradigm of surrealist framework and a diverse narrative. This breakdown of theatrical expectations and the annulment of reason can be observed through the Father's thought provoking dialogues, one of which elucidates how "life is full of all sorts of odd things which have no need at all to pretend to be real because they are actually true." (Pirandello, 2021: 12)

Additionally, the movements of the Characters as they enter the stage, coupled with their clothes and masks, serves to dismantle the audience from their position as the spectators and instead makes them active participants who have to help the Characters in finding the author through their use of imagination. The minimalist setting and the director's comments perform as a framing agent for the narrative of the play. Entirely, the premises of the Actors and the Producer's disbelief and unwilling intrigue echoes the reactions of the spectators in the audience. The result is quite ingenious, instead of the play appearing as unrealistic and nonsensical, the narrative strengthens the humanist parallelism of existentialist thoughts with instinctual curiosity.

Following the entrance of the Characters, the Father and the Producer delve into the ontological limitations of existence involved in the creation of a work of art. Pirandello's directions regarding the Characters and his insistence on them wearing masks signifies that he means to illustrate the sociopolitical ethos of the prototypical practices of Drama. The Characters' search for an author can perhaps be construed as a rudimentary emulation of the modern society finding the locus of the meaning behind their existence; maybe a reactionary calling. This description of an elusive author, perhaps demonstrated as a substitute metaphor for the meaning of life, can be supported by Pirandello's belief that the powers of human fantasy are instrumental to the 'spontaneous creation of art' when married with the divine inspiration of nature. The sublime elevation of the power of human imagination, moreover, is further cemented through the Characters' display of real emotions, their opinions and their actions "however sidetracked" are a necessary precursor to the advancement of the non chronological plot. Their desperation to prove their existence evokes a pitying response from the audience, more enunciated by the Step Daughter's song and the Mother's passive resignation to her lot in 'life'. Artistically depicted as they may be, the turning point occurs after the Father has justified that just as one can be born to life as a tree, or as stone or water, they can be born as a character in a place as well.

In the sense, that the author who created us alive no longer wished, or was no longer able, materially to put us into a work of art. And this was a real crime, sir; because whoever has the luck to be born a character can laugh even at death. Because a character will never die! The man, the writer, the instrument of the creation will die, but what he has created does not die. (Pirandello, 2021: 14)

From the literary cornerstones of theoretical concepts such as Barthes' *The Death of the Author* to cinematic icons such as *Goosebumps* and *Toy Story*, the existential aura of a diminished, but certifiable, state of being haunts the corridors of human imagination. This peripheral idea of an extended existence and the contortion

of an adjacent reality is further perpetuated by the conception of the author breathing life into their work of art. Even as the creator gets extinguished by the tests of time, the work of art and the creator's imaginary world continues its perennial discourse. For instance, Shelley's poem *Ozymandias* illuminates the inevitability of life and how the perishing dominion of pompous grandeur becomes ravaged by time. The poem, depressingly so, postulates how the material and the greed of humans is eventually worn down by nature whereas the art and the power of words may carry their significance till posterity.

Therefore, Pirandello's hyperfixation on the presuppositional 'illusion' of reality and its symbiotic relationship with art moves to prolong the transcendental amalgamation between the division of the Actors and the Characters as their stories are unravelled. The *Six Characters* is a representative modern piece which is emblematic of the conflicting binaries present in human personalities, leading to emotional dilemmas and compromise of agency on the part of the Mother and the Step Daughter. However, the character of Madame Pace, if one can call her that, is one that remains distinguished from the Six Characters and the Actors of the play. She is the only character who has been given a name, although she appears as the part of the plot regarding the Six Characters, it is evident that she is mostly a bystander. She remains suspended in the throes of dominance between the framed narratives of verisimilitude and mimetic plot. Her only contribution is to further divide the 'family' and manipulate the Step Daughter into joining her ranks. Other than the obvious, her significance remained obscure until critic Eric Bentley observed that her character could be the antithesis of the Mother, the frequent antagonist of fairy tales; the wicked Stepmother who preys on the naive innocence of children. (Bentley, 1972: 53)

Furthermore, many critics such as Jerome Mazzaro rightfully opine that:

With his voices, Pirandello is able to conceive in *Six Characters* a drama about the writing of a drama and to invent what Wylie Sypher calls "cubist drama." Audiences no longer see by means of illusion so much as *into* illusion. Plot as it pertains to linear development becomes subordinate to life and art exchanges.

2. Subversion of Commedia dell'Arte

Commedia dell'Arte refers to an early form of Italian theatre characterised by stock characters in a variety of masks, popular in Europe from the 16th to the 18th century. In a typical play, a pair of young lovers outwit a rich old father ("Pantalone"), aided by a clever and intriguing servant ("Harlequin"), in a plot enlivened by the buffoonery of "Punch" and other clowns. (Abrams, 1999: 42)

Not unlike slapstick and minstrel comedy, this improvised form of professional comedy garnered a colossal audience in Italian literary circles. However, this art form gradually began to diminish as the thrill of rigidity of plot and the stock characters were worn out and appeared shifty. In Luigi Pirandello's play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the audience witnesses a sudden 'revival' of this art form. However, Pirandello's rendition of Commedia dell'Arte was pointedly structured to parody the constructs of the said art form in question. In the stage directions instructing the arrival of the Characters in the spotlight, Pirandello insists

that the Characters appear as "timeless creations of the imagination", frozen in time just as each of them are defined by the masks they adorn on their faces. He insists that the Characters seem:

More real and consistent than the changeable realities of the Actors. The masks are designed to give the impressions of figures constructed by art, each one fixed forever in its own fundamental emotion; that is Remorse for the Father, Revenge for the Step Daughter, Scorn for the Son and Sorrow for the Mother. (Pirandello, 2021: 10)

The emphasis on the Characters, when juxtaposed with the indifference towards the appearance of Actors, shows Pirandello's dedication to supply the motif of the play which solely rests upon the unsolicited breakdown of all stereotypical paradigms. For instance, when referring to the Mother, the Father insists that "she's not a woman, she's a mother". Here, the very idea of motherhood is detached from womanhood. It signifies the phallogocentric prejudice which enforces their female counterparts to be subservients, either as the seductress (the Step Daughter) or the self-sacrificing martyr (the Mother), or the scorned woman (Madame Pace). The self-reliance of Madame Pace, when coupled with the rambunctious rebellion of the Step Daughter, symbolises the deconstruction of patrilineal conformity as far as the idea of the New Woman is concerned. The timid, four year old girl represents the loss of childlike wonder that the female consciousness experiences before they've encountered the oppressive doctrines of patriarchal domestication. It certainly explains why the Step Daughter remains protective of the girl and unforgiving towards the fourteen year old boy. In the girl, the Step Daughter searches for her salvation and a way to assuage her anguish over her illegitimate status. On the other hand, the boy stands for everything the Step Daughter resents because his male status has the power to, someday, take away her agency like the Father attempted to do and declare her a hysterical harlot like the Son accuses her to be.

Therefore, instead of representing stock characters, as is expected from a dramatic form of Commedia dell'Arte, Pirandello skillfully sculpts his Characters to be convoluted and with far more emotional depth than the Actors. Gradually, as the drama progresses, it unravels the backstory of the Father's sinuous desires, the Mother's shame and humiliation, the Son's narcissism and sullen demeanor, and the reason behind the Boy's suicide. Families are the basic, fundamental units of our society. They are pillars of trust, companionship, love and affection in the cultural heritage of social constructs. Ironically, the Six Characters are representative of the breakdown of fealty, love and the bond between parent and child. By the end of the play, Pirandello puts it indubitably that these Characters are more real than the entire European society would ever admit them to be.

Each of us is several different people, and all these people live inside us. With one person we seem like this and with another we seem very different. But we always have the illusion of being the same person for everybody and of always being the same person in everything we do. (Pirandello, 2021: 29)

3. Hyperreality through Dramatic Irony, Setting and Dialogues

Baudrillard's concept of Hyperreality paints the metafictional junction of realism and simulacra in a vivid pastiche through the play as the Characters contort the surroundings around them to reflect their existential dilemma much like a sculptor moulds the truth of their creation in a mimetic reflection. In *Six Characters*, the Father is the one character around which the entire premises of both, the inner and the outer plays, pirouettes. The poststructuralist thought of self realisation and Lacan's mirror stage can be applied in deconstructing the dramatical rhetoric of the Six Characters, which relies upon distinguishing the Self as the Father from the Other or the Shadow which are the five characters. The dramatic irony of the play, therefore, lies within the Father's action or the lack thereof. It is the Father who is supposed to delegate the moral constructs within the family and it is the Father himself who disrupts them. Subsequently, the Daughter who was supposed to be virtuous is forced to rely on the carnal needs of the Father to survive, the Mother who instead of a person remains more of a pitiable object; therefore leading to the Son who denies his patronymic legacy. This ironic inversion, so to say, advances the subversion of the spectator's role of interpretation since the Characters analyse themselves and each other quite conveniently. It centres the gendered dichotomy of power structures and eliminates the sociopolitical echoes of male chauvinism, therefore Pirandello emulates the insurgence of biological determinism as the play provides the spectators' with the hypocrisy behind the conflict between morality and physicality. Other ironic moments occur such as the Mother's mask being frozen in the set of emotion of sorrow, which perhaps can be construed to be a foreshadow of the grim ending of the play, Madame Pace's 'kindness' towards the Mother and her children, the caricature of the female characters in the play heightened to extreme extents so as to illuminate the cracks underneath the veneer of polite gentility.

The play's setting at the Brothel is significant in highlighting the crux of the monumental event which ruined the two families, it represents the forbidden discourse of incestuous undertones and the Freudian perversion of the Electra Complex. The opacity of the screen symbolises morality whereas the mirror lays the deprivation of morality bare and transparent to everyone. The mirror illustrates the essentializing narrative of verisimilitude through Madame Pace's subterfuge and the Step Daughter's loss of innocence. The setting of the screen and the mirror also supplies the demarcation between the reality and the hyperreality, it elucidates how Pirandello moulds the fluctuation between surrealist junction of existence and its impressions seamlessly to exploit the morbid fascination of the Actors and the spectators alike. The screen functions to represent the Father's voyeuristic tendencies coming to fruition as he sheds his persona of the kind and altruistic father just looking out for his estranged wife and her children.

Shame? Not shame, revenge! I'm desperate, desperate to live that scene! The room... over here the showcase of coats, there the divan, there the mirror, and the screen, and over there in front of the window, that little mahogany table with the pale blue envelope and the money in it. I

can see it all quite clearly. I could pick it up! But you should turn your faces away, gentlemen: because I'm nearly naked! I'm not blushing any longer. (Pirandello, 2021: 20)

It becomes conspicuously clear that the Father was the last nail on the coffin of the family. His supremacy, his authority and his status becomes decentralised. *Six Characters*, moreover, can be construed as a reversal of evangelical hegemony of the Holy Trinity. Where the Father himself is unidimensional, the Step Daughter represents a multidimensional discourse of the hysterical woman who thrives on humiliation, conflict and madness. These polar extremities like the Father and the Son, the Mother and the Step-Daughter, the little boy and the girl, the Characters and the Actors, represent the existential dilemma of patriarchal as well as ontological undertones of cultural dichotomy.

Even the dialogues in the play force the spectators to evaluate the truth within the play, which is that no one can ever be undoubtedly sure of themselves or their own existence, it raises the epistemological concern of believing one's truth despite other's perceptions regarding them. Pirandello maneuvers the geospatial realm of parasocial interactions as the foundation of the ongoing correspondence between the Characters, the Actors and the Producer. The Father's intellectual and philosophical entreatings which he announces with great aplomb, the Step Daughter's spiteful rhetoric that enraptured and repulses all who behold upon her theatrics, the Son's vitriol which is caustic enough to make his mother whimper and the Step Daughter to scoff, the Mother's panic and tragic misery which is dismissed by all but perfectly punctured by the silent and quivering Boy and Girl standing by her side; helps their status to 'take precedence and usurp the real' indiscriminately.

The distinction between the Actors' and the Characters becomes starkly evident since the Actors' dialogues are vague, superficial and used more as filler than anything else. So much so that their characterisation is sparse and incomplete which is directly contrasted with the playwright's intense focus towards the appearance, the gestures and the vocalisation of the Characters, hence the end result being the dramatic irony which makes the Actors appear to be the caricatures of the Characters rather than fixed icons of reality and vice versa.

Conclusion

For Pirandello, every being that has come to existence has their own perspective of the universe around them. Pirandello ventures to highlight that this realisation is where our emotions such as the feeling of non-belonging and the psychological motif of Jung's *persona* arises from. Our selective interpretation cultivates a mixture of infinite manifestations and multitudinous complexities of emotional legacy carried within the latest contextual successor. These elements; ironic inversion, non-linear plot development, obscure intertextuality and diverse scale of Characters and Actors, afford Pirandello the ability to provide the audience with the experience to witness the birth of unprecedented artists and the creation of the Meta theatre where the scope of adjacent reality itself remains unattainably unparalleled.

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