

## Disappearance of the Author: A Foucauldian Study of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Nazneen Zahra<sup>1</sup>  
Dr Behzad Anwar<sup>2</sup>  
Shamshad Rasool<sup>3</sup>

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**Abstract:** Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* was an innovative juncture in theatre with its avant-garde dramatic devices. Pirandello has presented the idea of the relation between the author and his creation and highlighted the disappearance of the subject in the narrative. The present study employs Foucault's idea of the author function in the play to explore the effort of the characters to present their narrative while the author has disappeared. The unexpected entry of six self-conscious characters illustrates and emphasizes the creative process and the continuity of the artistic works. The study finds that Pirandello has skillfully handled the theatricality resulting in a novel perspective of the theatre and shed light on the freedom of the characters that symbolizes the text, and drafted their story as they like. It, further, pinpoints their quest and success in mastering authority over their discourse in the absence of their creator.

**Keywords:** Avant-garde, disappearance, discourse, self-conscious characters, theatricality

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<sup>1</sup> Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, , Gujrat, Pakistan:nazneen.zahra@uog.edu.pk

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan: behzad.anwar@uog.edu.pk

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan:shamshad.rasool@uog.edu.pk

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### Introduction

Pirandello, an Italian dramatist, is famous for his ingenuity. He is known to employ various techniques in presenting his plots and actions on stage. In his plays, a dominant strain is evident towards psychoanalysis where not only the author psychologizes his characters but the characters themselves also try to uncover the identity of other

characters as well as their own. He employs the technique of frame narrative whereby one narrative encompasses various narratives and stories within itself. Further, a marked emphasis is also laid on the idea of self. He depicts the quest and the resulting conflict, which arises during the search for one's identity, the unfeasibility of realistic communication amongst

people, and the clash between appearance and reality. The use of the frame narrative leads to blurring the boundary between illusion and reality. He exhibits multiple appearances, which are at the same time unreal but appear to be true. He conveys the notion of multiple identities that a human being has and how an individual maintains a façade for society that clashes with his true self.

*In Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1994), Pirandello demonstrates the notion of relative truth and rejection of objective reality presented through one person's vision. His typical concept of contrast between the notion of everlasting art and the transient life of human beings as opposed to that of characters finds expression here. It shows the plight of the characters who are rejected by their creator but have more intense vitality as compared to real actors.

This research paper aims at exploring Foucault's (1977) idea of the absence of the author within the play. The objective is to investigate the

endeavour of the characters to present their own story when the author of their play has disappeared. It also highlights the character's independence that serves as the text and changes the story and its representation as they like. It explores the self-reflective narrative in the absence of its author. After having been created, they regulate their discourse and wish the process of the staging of the play to be adapted according to their wishes.

### **Literature Review**

The author, his relation with the text and his function within a discourse have been the focal point of literary discussion for the last few centuries. Many theorists and critics have presented various theories contemplating the control an author wields on the text, and consequently, how his absence may affect the text while evaluating any piece of writing. Barthes discusses the role of the author who is extracted and distanced – in other words, murdered- from the discourse in “The Death of the Author” (1977) while Foucault has discussed the

function of an author in his essay *What is an Author* (1977). For recent scholarship addressing the questions of authorship and textual ownership, Logie's (2017) essay has presented a new understanding of the authority of the author, significantly different from previous concepts.

Barthes (1977) challenged the traditional mode of interpretation of a text that focuses on the context and intention of the author. He, instead, argues that the writer and his writing are unrelated and that his identity, personal context and views should be set aside while extracting the meaning of a text. When the analysis of the text is connected with its author, it limits it to specific interpretations. Hence, for the liberation of a text, it is necessary to separate it from its creator. Every piece of writing allows for multiple interpretations and they cannot be derived from one person's experience rather the meaning lies within the language of the text. Barthes exterminates the authority of the author and gives control to the language itself.

The death of the creator gives the idea of the co-existence of multiple meanings and the liberation of a text from its author's intent. He is of the view that text is the space that exists without the existence of the writer and stands on its own "starting with the very identity of the body writing" (p. 142) and the identity of the author is lost. He asserts that, by distancing the authorial influence and intent, the text loses its author and writing begins.

Barthes, further, asserts that the author has been given undue significance. He still reigns in literature, biographies, and magazines. Critics try to unite the author and his works. Literature is, inherently, centered on the life, tastes and passions of the authors. The literary work is explained keeping in mind the writer behind it and a single person is given full authority as "his "sway" was "powerful" (Park, p. 377). However, now there is a new outlook to investigate a literary work. The author is a myth that is "necessary to overthrow" (Barthes, 1977, p. 377). His idea has liberated the text from this tyranny and

empowered language which allows for various ideas and interpretations. Barthes considers the death of the author essential because for many centuries the authors have been considered the uncontested authority of the language” (p. 380). The creator is no more responsible for the opinions and truths presented in the text and must, according to Barthes, relinquish his seemingly conclusive hold on the text. He declares Mallarme the first one to reject the presence and control of the author in the text. He emphasized the necessity to substitute the owner of the text with language which speaks, acts and performs more than the author. He suppresses the presence of the creator and gives priority to writing.

The analysis of a text means its disentanglement, and looking into its structure without anything behind it. The author's death is the reduction of the power of his presence and he is nobody but a “hand, cut off from any voice. . .” (p. 146). Barthes presents that author is the subject who loses his self when the work is created. It originates through

language itself. The whole power lies in language and “to give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text” and is simply “to close the writing” (p. 147).

North (2017) explains it through an analogy that an author, like a photographer, initiates the process: “The authorial function is just mechanical and is reduced almost to vanishing” (p. 1379). The authority of the author lies with just presenting the text and once it is done, it is the language and the text itself that becomes the focus. He refers to T. S. Eliot for whom “impersonality has the effect of isolating the self within a text” (p. 1384) which protects it from all social and personal contexts and makes it fully independent. There has been a long campaign to isolate the writer from the text. Therefore, the supposed absence of the author proves to be “the last and most extreme move since death meant freedom from everyday reality” (p. 1384). Barthes argues that once published, the text is no longer under the control of the author and he becomes irrelevant. Logie (2017) considers Barthes’s essay significant for

critics and scholars who challenge traditional analysis and understanding of the text in which the author was supposed to be the solitary creator of the text. He remarks that “Barthes’s text has provided an anchoring point for waves of theoretical challenges to this “capital A” Author (p. 494).

Foucault’s *What is an Author?* (1977) was a rejoinder to Barthes’s ideas and added to the notion of the absence of an author within the text. Foucault focuses on the relationship between the text and the author. He puts aside the previous analysis of the author, the impact of his individuality on the text and the restriction to the criticism to a singular relationship between the text and the author. He highlights a point of indifference for the analysis of a text. This principle of indifference directs writing as a continuous practice and draws “attention to the finished product” (p. 1477).

He, further, discusses the function of criticism and its concerns. Its function is not to explore the connections between the product and the

author. His experiences and intentions should be left aside. Its task is “the structures of a work, its architectonic forms, which are studied for their intrinsic and internal relationships” (p. 1478). He refers to Derrida’s (1978) conception of *écriture* which “should allow us not only to circumvent references to an author but to situate his recent absence” (p. 1479). This notion does not focus on the act of writing or any indications related to the person behind it. It puts the position of an author in anonymity.

According to Foucault, after the disappearance of the author, it is appropriate to reexamine to observe the gaps and try to work on the reapportionment of this emptiness. It shows that Foucault relates his point of disappearance with Barthes’s idea of the death of the author and considers the filling of the vacuum important. So the writer is deprived of his function and role as the originator.

Despite the questions raised about the status of an author within a text, Foucault raises new questions

about the text which put aside the role of the author and emphasize the discourse-like modes of its existence, where it originates, how it gets propagated and who has control over it. Foucault contends that meaning does not exist outside discourse. It carries the knowledge which it produces and becomes complete and powerful. Such facets provide a background for the formation of the 'author function'. Wilson avers that the sovereignty of authors buried the discourse, the actual source of power and authority. Instead of focusing on the writer, one should attend to the discourse which speaks about itself. For the real meaning of a text, the writer's characteristics should be effaced from it.

The preference of the author is, in fact, a way of limiting the text which is negated by both Foucault and Barthes. He remarks that Beckett also discusses the same idea in *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (1967). They have erased "the authorial voice". They investigate the texts and go deep to lead a reader to the actual "predetermined interpretive and

intertextual avenues" (p. 295). Foucault has also addressed a similar idea and talked about discourse or a text which does not need an author and does not matter who is speaking.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Foucault's approach of the absence of the author on Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* along with Barthes' (1984) concept of the death of an author. To explore the story of six characters without the creator and their independence in presenting it on stage, the theory of authorship has been employed. Their presence without their writer and their way of becoming the authority is the point of discussion. This study is based on the interpretation of a literary text in the light of key concepts of Foucault's "What is an Author?".

Foucault has made 'the author' the place of inquiry and explored the significance of the absence of an authoritative figure behind a text. He argues about the change in the literature regarding the absence of the author as he considers that literature itself has

brought about the change that is “the total effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer” (p. 1477) from a text. He finds the writing authoritative that follows its own rules. Today, he claims that the writing refers to itself, free “from the necessity of ‘expression’. . . .” (p. 1477). It is an action that tests its limits, transgresses and reverses the order as writing certainly surpasses the rules. Therefore, exalted emotions have no role in the “insertion of a subject into language” (p. 1477). Primarily, it creates an opening for the writing subject to disappear. Like Barthes, Foucault is also against the formal reading of a text and advocates the freedom of writing where it represents itself only.

Foucault’s other point is that there is no link between a writer and his generated work. He avers that the directive works, now, have the right to murder its author. In addition, the individual qualities of a writer are distanced from his work and the confrontation between the two becomes the cause of the erasure of his

personality. Currently, one can know the writer through his absence which transforms him “into a victim of his own writing” (p. 1478). He ends his essay with the final remarks about the unnecessary questions about the presence of individuality behind a text. He imagines a culture where discourses reign without any prerequisite of an author. He presents the significance of a text and its structures without the presence of its creator and concludes by quoting Beckett “What matter who's speaking” (p. 1490).

The present research looks at the text and explores its ideas keeping in mind Foucault’s and Barthes’ concepts of the disappearance of the author. It investigates how the play functions as an individual text and its characters play their role as the authoritative parts of the play without their creator.

### **Discussion**

Pirandello is categorized as a psychoanalytic writer who lays great emphasis on the working of the unconscious mind, seeking to examine the interior features of human nature

that often lead to a search for self-identity (Mahmoudpour & Zarrinjooee, 2014). In this play, the characters come on the stage in search of their identity that they think is lost because of the loss of the author. The characters are caught in a torturous state of mind and their condition is made acute further by the absence of the authority of their creator. In such a dilemma, the characters come forward intending to become the narrators of their own story. They narrate every aspect of their lives, and their actions based on their first-hand experiences. The main objective of the characters is to search for their identity by unravelling the self. Upon first materializing on the stage, the characters, eventually, realize their existence, independence and voice. Thus, they are led to recognize and acknowledge the presence of a text within them. Brusquely, they start not only controlling their narratives but also commanding the attention of the audience – in the instance of the play, the director and the individual's presence on the stage.

*Six Characters in Search of an Author* is considered Pirandello's masterpiece that proved his status as a major dramatist in the theatrical world. There are various strands in the play highlighting the intellect, philosophy and literary thoughts of the playwright. This meta-theatrical drama ruminates over the link between the author, characters and theatre. The play depicts the clash between illusion and reality and the dramatization of the creative process of writing and its performance on stage. The play can be deemed a demonstration of the creative process through which a work of literature is created particularly emphasizing how the creation of characters takes place. The six characters without an author but with a script, the actors rehearsing a play under the supervision of a producer, and the dramatic conventions contribute to making the play a unique one. This significant piece of writing is about stagecraft, the drift between illusion and reality and the personal angst and pain of the personas.



The title indicates the journey and the search of the characters for an author that is also their quest for a harmonious conclusion. The author's position is discussed concerning the story he has created and the authority that the six persons enjoy after his disappearance. The multiple authors hinted in the play seem to be absent.

Foucault talks about the absence of the writer and the effacement of his personality from the text. This idea is highlighted in Pirandello's talk about the origin of the play in the preface. He states that he can see the character alive before him:

".... you could touch them and even hear them breathe- the six characters now seen on the stage...creatures of my spirit, these six were already living a life which was their own and not mine anymore, a life which it was not in my power anymore to deny them...They are detached from me; live on their own; have acquired voice and movement; have by themselves...become dramatic characters" (1977, p. 7).

The author creates a story and its personas but it remains a mystery to him; why and how they are created. He creates many significant characters who, later on, gain more importance and construct their existence. He further says that the characters, standing apart from his narrative support, "from a novel miraculously emerging from the pages of the book that contained them, went on living on their own" (p. 7). The author they are in search of is missing and they attain the sovereignty of their narrative.

According to Foucault, writing creates a space where the author automatically disappears and the whole authority moves to the text. Similarly, the characters in the play are separated from their creator which grants an autonomous existence to the writing itself; while the position of the author is completely dismissed resulting in his departure. The writing stands as an act of expression on its own without requiring the crutches of authorial intent. These six ones are demonstrated as the self-governing text and other

actors and the producer serve the purpose of the reader. They create their own space and perform their narrative as they have lived through it. The focus is transported from the writer to the text and the characters are given authority to debate and refigure their existence. The author being nowhere, “let them go where dramatic characters do go to have life: on a stage. Drama which is conveyed through the characters, who carry it within them and suffer it” (p. 8).

The six characters regulate a particular identity with which they can perform on stage and, for this, they need the help of the producer. The producer seems unable to give them a life and identity but agrees to listen to their story. They tell him the whole story of their creation and existence which we can safely conjecture is a mirror image and not reality. However, the simple courtesy extended by the producer who allows the character to act out their own story seems to provide the characters with a sense of agency. Being able to narrate and partly act out their narrative before a handful of attentive listeners

seems to reassure and reaffirm their existence. The characters realize their real selves which have been created and need no more individuals behind them. They take the responsibility of representation and every action on the stage. “The insistence of the characters upon an independent spiritual essence” (Quinn, 1989, p. 81) is the focus of the play showing the insignificance of the subject behind them.

Foucault and Barthes contend that the text can stand as a whole and it can murder its author to assert its sole individuality. The focal point of the play is the self-referential quality of the play and the self-consciousness of the six characters. The characters are seen discussing and deliberating over the presentation of their narrative, and how it must be performed. The play is about the theatrical performance of a story whose personas become the controlling authority. Their conversation about theatre and the enactment of their emotions covers the main action of the play. The character of the father appears

exulted in his existence relishing his apparent immortality.

Six characters come looking quite “puzzled and dismayed” and the effect created is to show that “the six CHARACTERS are very different from the actors of the company”. They are presented not as ghosts but “as created realities, timeless creations of the imagination and so more real and consistent than the changeable realities of the ACTORS” (p. 75). The producer inquires about the characters of their identity and purpose in interrupting the rehearsal. The father replies, “We're looking for an author” (p. 77). He thinks that any author can be acceptable to them but the producer completely rebuffs him saying, “But there isn't an author here because we're not rehearsing a new play”. This interests them because according to the stepdaughter, “that's better still, better still! We can be your new play” (p. 77). So they have their own story, their existence and they can survive without the author. Father tells that “We are bringing you a story of anguish” (p. 77). Then later on he talks

about the life presented on stage, he remarks, “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” (p. 77). This refers to the reality of their life which must be represented as true.

The producer emphasizes the fact of how the actors live up to a dull work created by authors. He claims that “Even if nowadays the new writers only give us dull plays to act and puppets to present instead of men. It is our boast that we have given life, here on this stage, to immortal works” (p. 78). This declaration leads the character to realize that they alone are most suited to presenting their roles rather than allowing actors to play their story. So they become responsible for bringing life to a text rather than the writer himself. This hints about the insignificance of the author who is left behind after creating any writing.

The characters demonstrate the story they carry with them as the father says, “The play is in us: we are the play and we are impatient to show it to you:

the passion inside us is driving us on” (p. 80). They are self-sufficient and can show themselves. Further, he adds that, perhaps, he is unwilling to believe him for not being in a script. He states, “Perhaps you are not used to seeing the characters created by an author spring into life up here on the stage face to face with each other. Perhaps it's because we're not in a script?” (p. 79). They are without a script but they make a text that speaks about itself.

Father talks about the inability of the creator who could not make them live and he is mortal as compared to the created piece of writing that lives forever. “The author who created us, living in his mind, wouldn't or couldn't make us live in a written play for the world of art...because a character will never die! A man will die, a writer, the instrument of creation: but what he has created will never die!” (p. 79). He is of the view that these people have extraordinary abilities to sustain themselves for their own sake and “they had the luck to find a fruitful soil, an imagination which knew how to grow

them and feed them so that they will live forever” (pp. 79-80). After listening to the story and their dramatic situation, the producer agrees to give them a chance to act on stage. The characters serve as a good caste for the play as he states, “I'm sure we've the material here for a good play” (p. 94) and “something extraordinary might come out of this” (p. 96).

When the producers make the actors rehearse the roles of characters, they object to their acting and the representation, which is not according to them. Stepdaughter complains, “I was thinking about me: I can't see myself in you at all...you're not a bit like me!” (p. 101). A similar objection is raised by the father who says, “It will be difficult or it to be a performance of me as I really am-it will be more an interpretation of what I am, what he believes me to be, and not how I know myself to be” (p. 102). Father is quite impatient about the actors being others, not they: “However they want to be the same as us, they're not” (p. 114). That is the point of difference as they are the only

representatives of their narrative and no one else can deeply get into that.

They claim to have their own 'meaning' which is exclusively present in them and no one from outside can understand it well. Their identity and characteristics compel them to present their role themselves. They are brought to life and are more real than the actors who are performing their roles. This is how the characters are trying to affect the performance of their script and become the sole authority of the text created by the missing author. The producer's dialogue clarifies their position as authors who are in full control of their lives. He states, "It's always a bad idea to have rehearsals with authors there" (p. 114). Hence, the creation of the plot is in their hands now and they are handling the rehearsal of the play.

Pirandello has defined the personality of a character with unique qualities that make him distinct. "A character really has a life of his own, a life full of his specific qualities, and because of these, he is always

'someone'" (p. 123). Here it relates to the discourse which is unique in itself independent of any external force. Father gives a detailed description of the relationship between an author and the characters and how characters become more powerful than the creator and try to empower him. Sometimes they acquire meaning which is specific to them and the author even does not dream of giving them.

In existential philosophy, a person is known by the choice he makes not by his birth. So in this play, characters are no more the creator's constructions rather they identify themselves and build their lives by their own will. Their story has been written once but now their actions and success can enable them to reword their identity. They successfully illustrate the fact that the text seeks its meaning within itself unshackled by outer influences.

Sogliuzzo (1966) remarks, "While the action develops out of the conflict between the characters and the producer, and between the characters themselves as they perform their drama,

the unseen protagonist is the author himself, who has refused to realize his characters into an artistic entity, forcing them to find their own author, and so complete the purpose for which they were intended” (p. 226).

The author is often considered the verbal glue keeping together the order and structure in theatre. In this play, this form is inverted where there is disruption when the characters enter. Before the characters' sudden entrance, a rehearsal is going on which is interrupted by them, breaking away from the formal tradition of play. Later on, they take control of the structure of the performance which shows that the writer being the sole authority of the order is just an illusion.

O’Rawe (2006) talks about this idea in such words that the search for the creator or author is the main idea which dominates “the study of Pirandello, both within and without his works: biographers of Pirandello have consistently tried to reinstate (have claimed to have 'found') the 'absent' author of his most famous play, *Six*

*Characters in Search of an Author*. While Pirandello's works speak constantly of the dangers of confusing art and life” (p. 992).

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, Foucault is against the formal reading of a text and argues for the freedom of writing. He talks about the text as a sole authority without its creator where it enjoys its existence. This concept has been adopted by Pirandello in the play where the author of the text disappears and the characters have to become the controller of their identity. The play presents the idea of effacement of the text from the writer and how a play can work and the characters can perform without the main authority who used to be very significant. Everyone becomes self-sufficient in performance and realizes his self-identity when his creator is lost. Foucault is against the formal reading of a text and argues for the freedom of writing. He talks about the text as a sole authority without its creator where it enjoys its existence. This concept has been adopted by Pirandello in the play

where the author of the text disappears and the characters have to become the controller of their identity. The play presents the idea of effacement of the text from the writer and how a play can work and the characters can perform without the main authority who used to be very significant. Everyone becomes self-sufficient in performance and realizes his self-identity when his creator is lost.

Pirandello is one of those writers who has highlighted the issue of identity either of the author or the characters. He has brought to light new ways of looking at a text, perceiving and understanding it. He points to the ability of the human mind to realize an identity that is not dependent on anything. His play talks about the identity of the characters who represent a text by an author and raises the question of who they are actually. These characters have enough intellect to realize their value as a person other than as the constructed image by the creator. They control their story and its representations by drafting the play and changing it the way it suits

them. The play depicts life on stage in which there is a play that could be played without the real author.

The present study explored the notion of the absence of the author and consequently its effects on the text. It stressed the authority of the author and explored the absence of the writing subject and how that space is covered by the text itself. The emptiness provides a space where the characters to act, perform and generate their own story which is not dependent on the author.

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