

# Ontological Foregrounding in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Masoud Madahian, Hossein Pirnajmuddin\*

Department of English, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

\*E-mail address: pirnajmuddin@fgn.ui.ac.ir

## ABSTRACT

Pirandello's twentieth-century play is so form-conscious and experimental in technique that it can be characterized as postmodernist. As the dominant of postmodernist literature, ontology has formed the poetics of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The poetics of his play foregrounds ontology: different ontological planes are conceived in its world. Each of these planes – ontologies – stands for a world. Moreover, ontological foregrounding signifies breaking the ontological boundaries between the worlds in the play, hence the confusion of ontologies. The result has been the coexistence of different ontologies that induces ontological instability and indeterminacy in the structure of the play. In fact, the world logic of the six characters does not meet with that of the Actors, and it brings about ambiguity and a(n)(ontological) tension between their worlds.

**Keywords:** Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* postmodernist; ontology; foregrounding; indeterminacy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The drama of the twentieth-century Italian dramatist Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) is generally considered to be one of the forerunners of (post)modernist drama. What makes the anti-Aristotelian drama of Pirandello modernist is his acute sense of form; in this regard, his drama foreshadows those of dramatists such as Samuel Beckett or Bertolt Brecht and, of course, later modernist as well as postmodernist dramatists. On Pirandello's position and his influence, Robert Brustein says:

Pirandello's influence on the drama of the twentieth century is immeasurable. In his agony over the nature of existence, he anticipates Sartre and Camus; in his insights into the disintegration of personality and the isolation of man, he anticipates Samuel Beckett; in his unremitting war on language, theory, concepts, and the collective mind, he anticipates Eugene Ionesco; in his approach to the conflict of truth and illusion, he anticipates Eugene O'Neill (and later, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee);

in his experiments with the theatre, he anticipates a host of experimental dramatists, including Thornton Wilder and Jack Gelber; in his use of the interplay between Actors and characters, he anticipates Jean Anouilh; in his view of the tension between public mask and private face, he anticipates Jean Giraudoux; and in his concept of man as a role-playing animal, he anticipates Jean Genet. The extent of even this partial list of influences marks Pirandello as the most seminal dramatist of our time...(316).

The above description proves the variety of themes Pirandello's drama addresses. It couldn't be so unless he was innovative in his poetics. As such, the experimental nature of Pirandellian drama incorporates certain techniques that foreground distinct worlds in the text, hence the relevance of an ontological study of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) as it is „formally“ experimental. Antonio Illiano describes the revolutionary nature of the play thus: “the sudden and unexpected appearance of live characters, who claimed to belong on the stage and could actually be seen and heard, was like a bombshell that blew out the last and weary residues of the old realistic drama” (1). Pirandello, in his Preface to the play, defines this drama as a mixture of tragic and comic, fantastic and realistic, in a humoristic situation quite new and infinitely complex.

A highly self-conscious dramatist of the modern theatre, Pirandello is dominantly concerned with the ideas of life and form in his plays: “the typical Pirandellian drama is a drama of frustration which has at its core an irreconcilable conflict between [...] life and form” (Brustein 282). Parallel to these two ideas is the conflict between time and timelessness. The latter conflict, borrowed from Bergson, holds that “life (or reality or time) is fluid, immobile, evanescent, and indeterminate”(Brustein 286). Man equipped with power of reason tries “to fix life through ordering definitions. Since life is undefinable, such concepts are illusions. Man is occasionally aware of the illusory nature of his concepts; but to be human is to desire form; anything formless fills man with dread and uncertainty” (Brustein 286). In other words, forms, roles, definitions make man feel like human and apparently ensure his being and individuality. Implicit here is the question of life and art and the ontological relationship between them. Pirandello's point could be sought in the words of René Wellek who, on the literature of his time, maintains that the recognition of the difference between life and art – the recognition of the “ontological gap” between fiction as a product of the mind, a linguistic construct, and the events in “real” life reflected in it, does not mean that the work of art is cut off from reality, that is to say, the relation of art to reality is not like the one defined by naturalistic theories of “imitation” (Hutcheon 17).

Another source of concern in Pirandello is being too much exposed to reality which threatens the individual's identity. One solution, as explains Brustein, would be to evade reality by stopping time, and it is achieved through consciousness or reason (286). Therefore, “the play is a dizzying hall of mirrors that tests the philosophical basis of the concept of reality while exposing and renewing the operating principles of the drama” (Burt 256). The above points about Pirandello's drama are also reflected upon in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, but it is done through a specifically ontological point of view, which is part and parcel of postmodernist poetics. Accordingly, the aim of the following discussion is to reveal how the ontological structure of the play incorporates Pirandello's dramatic concerns, and how the question of ontology can explain *Six Characters*<sup>1</sup> according to postmodernist poetics.

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<sup>1</sup>Henceforward shortened to *Six Characters*.

## 2. DISCUSSION

### 2. 1. Ontological Foregrounding

In a general sense, the term foregrounding “may include all salient linguistic phenomena which in some way cause the reader’s attention to shift from the paraphrasable content of a message („what is said“) to a focus on the message itself („how it is said“)” (Childs & Fowler 91). Although a formalist reading is not the concern of this study, „how“ ontology is brought in the foreground is the focus of the following, hence the use of the term „foregrounding.“

The notion of ontology is dominant in Pirandello’s *Six Characters*. Coined in the seventeenth century, the term „ontology“ in philosophical language “refers to the study of what is” (Lechte 176), or, as defined by Borchert, “ontology is the most general science or study of Being, Existence, or Reality” (7: 21) which addresses some purely abstract ideas that lead to abstruse arguments in philosophy; this concept has received special attention in the so-called postmodern era so much so that postmodernism can be characterized in terms of ontology. Although such arguments are not translated into literature in their original form, there are a number of writers who are concerned with the question of ontology in their literary works. As a matter of fact, some writers attempt to contain the philosophical ontology in their texts. In relation to this tendency there are philosophical questions and doubts of different degrees and kinds which are interwoven in the texture of such writers. Besides the philosophical ontology, there is the literary ontology as well which will be the main focus of this study.

In literature, the term „ontology“ has been used to describe a certain characteristic of postmodernist literature. Brian McHale asserts that what happens from modernist to postmodernist fiction is a change of the „dominant“ from epistemology to that of ontology; this does not mean that bringing ontology into focus has totally eliminated epistemology from the poetics of postmodernist works, but simply pushing it into background at the cost for bringing ontology in the foreground. McHale contends that such fiction replaces epistemological issues dealing with world interpretation with ontological issues that are concerned with world construction (6-11). According to McHale, “postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground” ontological questions such as “Which world is this? What is to be done in it?” (10). Moreover, he designates two general levels at which ontological foregrounding is realized: the literary text itself and the projected world of it. The ontological questions are generally realized in literary works in the form of different possibilities, various alternatives, other worlds, and multiple universes, each being present at different levels of a work: the projected world, the text, the language, materiality of the book, and even the actual world outside the text.

Although Pirandello wrote his play in early 1920s, when epistemology was the dominant of modernist literature, his *Six Characters* mainly foregrounds ontological boundaries and ontological structures. The poetics of the play has been formed around the question of ontology; so, there would be an attempt to trace and argue for the postmodernist elements in Pirandello’s work, developed in the high modernist time. “With *Six Characters*,” maintains Harold Bloom, “he [Pirandello] turned with even greater fascination to exploring *personality* in its conscious and deliberate effort to come to terms with the environment” (56). Therefore, the search for identity becomes a most promising subject in such “theater” plays where dramatized are the drama of existential emotions and avant-garde techniques (Bloom 56). According to Illiano, in Pirandello “there is an epistemological and ontological preoccupation, in so far as the question „Who and what are the characters?“ is another way of

asking „Who and what am I?...“ (6), hence a search for identity that correlates with ontological issues. In relation to this theme, on some postmodernist characters who are described as in search of an author McHale states, “characters...[disturb] the ontological hierarchy of levels through their awareness of the recursive structures in which they find themselves” (121). This theatrical motif of characters in search of an author is paradigmatically dealt with in Pirandello’s *Six Characters*. The general structure of the play is the play-within-the-play (an example of a Chinese-box world): in an empty theatre a group of Actors are preparing to rehearse a play called “MIXING IT UP” by some dramatist named Pirandello when six (unfinished) characters suddenly interrupt them and begin to stage their „fiction“ in relation to the Actors. In other words, the story of characters is placed within the general frame work and plane (world) initially set by the rehearsal group. It is, from an ontological view, one level down within the (initial) projected world of the play. Afterwards there is a constant contact between the two intermingled ontological levels, that is to say, Actors interrupt the world of the characters and vice versa. The constant „ontological confusion“ between the two fictional frameworks destabilizes the world of the play. In consequence, it brings about an ontological tension that leads to a sort of indeterminacy in *Six Characters*. The above indeterminacy is represented and dramatized by Pirandello in the life-status of the six characters.

The Father says they (characters) are as “alive” as the Actors and claims to have their “own souls,” so they “want to live.” But this is in sharp contrast to what the Manager asserts: “you as yourself cannot exist. The Actor here acts you...” (Downer 816). Here the Actors represent “the people of flesh and blood, physical life,” and we “accept them not merely as plausible symbols but as real and actual human beings” (Illiano 4), hence their reality. This state of affairs is explained in „possible worlds theory“ as *modal realism*. As Ronen explains, “all modal possibilities we might stipulate, as well as the actual world, are equally realized in some logical space where they possess a physical existence” (21). For the major proponent of this view, David Lewis (1973), “„actual“ is rather an indexical term; the inhabitants of each world see their universe as the actual one [...] for Lewis such possible worlds [...] [have] their own laws and [...] an actuality of their own” (Ronen 22). However, the characters’ life is in a limbo-like situation: on the one hand, they have their own life – and supposed independence from their creator – and, on the other, they cannot come to life not until they have been dramatized and actualized by the Actors; in fact, they yearn for a „form.“ Accordingly, the uncertain existence of the characters could be attributed to “MIXING ontologies UP,” that is to say, there is no clear-cut boundary between the worlds of the characters and the Actors; and the consequent ontological intrusion or overlap brings about an identity crisis for the occupants of both worlds, mostly for the six characters. This is an anomalous „ontological zone“ because two worlds are simultaneously occupying the same space. In other words, the space of the fictional world has become an interface for two worlds to meet. As McHale elaborates, “space here is less constructed than *deconstructed* by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time” (45).

The six characters in Pirandello’s play are, from a traditional point of view, supposed to belong to the “book,” but their world has been “superimposed” onto the fictionally presumed „actual“ world of the Actors. The result is the paradoxical coexistence of two worlds neither of which is identifiable with the original two worlds. This third space – a *heterotopian* space – is, according to Umberto Eco, a “zone.” For Eco such radically discontinuous and inconsistent spaces are not “world[s],” since they fail to “observe the basic rules of world-building” (McHale 44). In other words, they break the law of the excluded middle. This law, a classical rationalist principle, rejects a middle state of affairs between existence and non-

existence. Within a possible world, statements should accord with the law of the excluded middle and be non-contradictory, or the world(s) they constitute will be counted as “impossible” world(s) (McHale 33). In *Six Characters* the world-space constructed by the „author“ is both the characters“ and that of the Actors yet belongs to neither of them; meanwhile, both worlds belong to the basic framework (story world) of *Six Characters*. This is an instance of breaking the law of the excluded middle, hence the impossibility of this world according to Eco. However, what seems to be ignored by Eco’s view is the complexity of such worlds: beyond the possibility or the impossibility of such (fictional) constructs is the way culture – or life – is formed. What seems to be the point inferred from the Pirandellian world formation is the fact that there are different factors, elements, discourses, etc. involved in the construction of culture or the world we live in, each of them – being mini-narratives in Lyotard’s terminology – claiming distinctness, independence, and authority to the point of a distinct ontology or world.

In this wise, the present indeterminacy in Pirandello’s play is due to an ontological confusion between the world of the Actors and that of the characters. The characters traditionally belong to the world of the “book.” Deprived of their own book-life, Pirandello’s six characters are looking for an author, or any author, to bring about (dramatize or actualize) their drama. As a matter of fact, the characters can conceive of an external world where an author has written them into their fictional life.

The above ontological accessibility (to another world or plane) – conceiving another world – is a postmodernist topos. But “the author these characters seek is himself a fiction, belonging to their world, not ours” (McHale 35), of course it is not inaccurate at all if one considers the actual Pirandello to be that author. Mazzaro puts it rather differently: “in *Seipersonaggi* there are three ongoing voices or actions. There are the narrative of the characters“ lives, the efforts of the Actors and the Manager to turn this narrative into the conventions of theater, and the authorial control of these two contexts to manage a work of art” (506); assumed, then, are three ontological planes. In addition, attention should be given to the biographical clues, such as the relationship between the Mother and the Father, in the play and their ontological undertones, that is the way biographical facts stand up to fictional representation and their ontological dividing line. In this regard, O’Rawe elaborates on the poetics of Pirandello’s biography and “the slippage,” in his biographies and biographical criticism, “between biographical and fictional texts, a slippage which also highlights a fundamental uncertainty about the nature of fictional text themselves and about the nature of reference in biography (and fiction)” (992). Notwithstanding, although the six characters break an ontological boundary and come to the actual (external) world, all this is taking place within the fictional framework of *Six Characters*, and this challenges the „sovereignty“ of the above world. Moreover, a further ontological instability is induced by questioning the world of the Manager:

THE MANAGER: [*perplexed, half-smiling*]. What? Who am I? I am myself.

THE FATHER: And if I were to tell you that that isn’t true, because you and I...?

THE MANAGER: I should say you were mad–! [*The ACTORS laugh.*]

(Downer 829)

Here the Father expresses the possible „fictionality“ of the Manager as well as his world. As a matter of fact, just in the same way the six characters have been written by an author, the Manager – as well as the Actors – and his world is suspicious to have been constructed or written by an author-god. As such, the Father is to some extent aware of the

possible ontology of the actual Pirandello, the author of *Six Characters*, and tries to cause an ontological doubt in the Manager, but the latter is too incredulous and finds the idea ridiculous, and it is due to the fact that he is from a different ontological horizon. The above upward ontological look by characters of a work of fiction to the world of the author is a postmodernist technique which is pushed to excess in order to demonstrate the possible „fictionality“ of all forms of reality in the so-called postmodern era – a cultural time marked with relativity, hyperreality and loss of the real, fragmentation, etc. *Six Characters*, therefore, could be conceived of as a proto-postmodernist work in this regard. However, one question is to be answered: is it true that the characters are more real than the Actors (or vice versa)? Both the question and the answer to it are related to a difference in ontological horizons, and the result has been two different views of „the real.“ Illiano explains that:

The answer to this question will vary according to the meaning we attribute to the adjective *reale*. If we take *reale* to refer to that which is “physical, having a body,” the answer is obviously negative. Here only the actors have physical substance, possess bodies, and are, therefore, real. If, on the other hand, we interpret *reale* in the philosophical sense of “pertinent to the *res* itself,” and therefore substantial and everlasting, then the answer is affirmative; the characters *are* more real than the actors (5).

Accordingly, the ambivalent treatment of „the real“ in the play originates from uncertain ontological points of reference, and the result has been a sense of ambiguity in *Six Characters*. The above dichotomy – ontological confusion of two horizons – is insoluble, as elaborates Illiano, so much so that “many observers and readers become easy prey to Pirandello’s mix-up, and instinctively pose the question, „but then what is more real than what?“” (4). In this situation two different views of reality exist, and, therefore, one possible interpretation could be that Pirandello embraces contradictory realities as his premise in the formation of *Six Characters*.

## 2. 2. Ontology and Metafiction

Another postmodernist aspect of *Six Characters* is metafictionality. Patricia Waugh (1984) defines metafiction as a “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality;” at issue are narrative structures and “the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (2). Furthermore, considering fiction as an “alternative world” where “truth” is attributed to fictional statements, Waugh asserts that “metafiction lays bare the linguistic basis of the „alternative worlds“ constructed in literary fiction” (100). In other words, the more the linguistic aspect of a text is foregrounded, the more the illusion of realistic fiction is shattered. “Metafictional texts thus,” Waugh maintains, “reveal the ontological status of all literary fiction: its quasi-referentiality, its indeterminacy, its existence as words and world” (101). The ontological aspect of metafiction is one of the concerns of Pirandello’s play. The central conflict in *Six Characters*, especially beginning in act two, is metafictional. “We’ve got to act a comedy now...,” says the STEP-DAUGHTER (Downer 812). The characters are aware that they have to act, but this is at odds with the Actors’ job. There is a basic disagreement between the characters and the Actors regarding the possibility of acting up the characters in an authentic way, and it upsets the characters. As the FATHER says, “...the actors aren’t the characters. They want to be, they pretend to be, don’t they?”

There would be a discrepancy between what the characters are in their fullness and the way the Actors play them: “I begin to hear my own words ring false, as if they had another sound...,” the FATHER asserts (Downer 815). Such metafictional remarks in the text hint at the fictionality of the world in which they are contained. Linda Hutcheon (1980) calls this “formal narcissism,” that is to say, “art has always been „illusion,“ and as one might surmise, it has often, if not always, been self-consciously aware of that ontological status” (17) – characters are aware their „fictional“ status and its distinctness. Such narcissistic narratives suggest “a certain curiosity about art’s ability to produce „real“ order, even by analogy, through the process of fictional construction” (19).

This is, in effect, a way of questioning the narrow view of fictional realism. Writers such as Pirandello “began to doubt the claim of external reality to being real, and chose instead to substitute an inner world of subjectivity and imagination” (Hutcheon 25). In a sense, metafictional awareness of the characters questions and destabilizes the ontological plane they inhabit while their own ontological plane is uncertain as well. To sum up, metafictionality, which self-awareness is a realization of it, assumes *metalepsis*<sup>2</sup> which is ontologically at a different plane from the main narrative line of the story – metafictionality assumes a higher narrative level. That is, the metafictional features of the works remove both the character and the reader to another (narrative) plane which is distinct from the story line; as such, the ontological status of the work is foregrounded.

### 2. 3. Ontology and Death

For Pirandello drama was a *continuum*, a constant *becoming* (Bloom 56); and, as was mentioned earlier, *Six Characters* is also concerned with the issue of time and timelessness which is related to the idea of change, since change presupposes time, hence the relevance of the question of death – the ultimate change – which is ontologically significant. McHale asserts that in postmodernist fiction, death has a functional role, that is, it sets stories going or brings them to an end. In other words, “death often marks the *limits* of the representation. There are important exceptions to this, when death becomes itself the object of representation” (McHale 228). As such, postmodernists bring death to the foreground. In this regard, Pirandello’s play incorporates death, a postmodernist concern, in its poetics.

Death is the ontological boundary that everyone will inevitably have to cross. “In a sense,” as McHale (1987) holds, “every ontological boundary is an analogue or metaphor of death; so foregrounding ontological boundaries is a means of foregrounding death, of making death, the unthinkable, available to the imagination, if only in a displaced way” (p. 231).

This is especially true of postmodernist fiction where an “other world” is projected through different strategies, such as: construction of paradoxical spaces, science-fictionalization of postmodernism, self-erasure, Chinese-box constructions, *metalepsis*, trope and literal confrontation, language and world, world and book, real and fictional, and so on (McHale 231). Furthermore, McHale maintains that “Postmodernist writing models or simulates death; it produces simulacra of death through confrontations between worlds, through transgressions of ontological levels or boundaries, or through vacillation between different kinds and degrees of „reality“” (232).

Therefore, foregrounding different ontologies (worlds) is a roundabout way of referring to death or change; implied here is uncertainty of the boundaries between ontologies and, in this case, the uncertain boundary of death. Besides this, the explicit reference to the death of

<sup>2</sup> The idea developed by Gérard Genette briefly refers to the transgression of narrative levels.

one of the characters has a special ontological significance. Just before the play ends “*a revolver shot rings out behind the trees where the BOY is hidden*” (Downer 836).

THE MANAGER: ... Is he really wounded?

SOME ACTORS: He's dead! dead!

OTHER ACTORS: No, no, it's only make believe, it's only pretence!

THE FATHER [*with a terrible cry*]: Pretence? Reality, sir, reality!

THE MANAGER: Pretence? Reality? To hell with it all! Never in my life has such a thing happened to me. I've lost a whole day over these people, a whole day!

(Downer 836).

These are the closing sentences of the play. In fact, the play ends with death. Is the Boy dead or alive? Is he merely pretending (acting) or living his death? Is this a change against what the Father asserts: “our reality doesn't change: it can't change! It can't be other than what it is, because it is already fixed for ever” (Downer 830)?

Here we have the confrontation of two worlds logics. Approached from the Manager and the Actors' „world view,” assuming themselves „actual”, the Boy's death is mere act of pretence, since for them the characters are „fictional” and not human beings capable of dying (a strong element of „becoming” signifying an irretrievably permanent change); so characters are „fixed” in timelessness – their essence is stable – as the Actors judge them according to their own world logic.

On the other hand, for characters the Boy's death is a reality belonging to their own world, that is, the world of fiction, hence the credibility of his death. In a sense, he commits suicide in order to be restored to life (Bloom 58) because it *is* the reality of his life. However, here death is not considered as a change but as a reality “already fixed” or predestined for him by his creator. As such, as the two ontological planes are mixed and their world logics coexist, there is a dilemma regarding the credibility and authenticity of the Boy's death in the play, and it is only due to an ontological confusion between the two worlds, or, as Bloom remarks, it is a juxtaposition of “real” events with stage plot, settings within settings, and realities within realities (56). At a higher level, according to Bloom, stage for Pirandello was:

the ideal medium for bringing together the illusion of life and the reality of the self. In this play “escape” also becomes freedom from the predictable connection between intentions and deeds: freedom from stage conventions, dramatic action and resolution, familiar dialogue and internal communications. (58)

Therefore, it could be argued that the Boy's suicide is an „act of revolt” against the passive illusionist conventions of the realist and naturalist drama. Yet it would be naïve to consider the characters' actions and intentions totally independent from their author though they seem so.

According to Clark, a character's struggle against flux and change and a desire for form is achieved “only in death at which time one's form can change no more” (279). Against the conventional creation of dramatic characters, as Clark notes, “in the six characters [...] existence precedes essence. But [...] essence here is unattainable [...] they are predestined not to find an author – i.e., not to have a stage being, a *raison d'être*, an essence” (282). Accordingly, the Boy's suicide could be interpreted as motivated by a desire for a fixed form, but it is doomed to failure because his death does not introduce a change against his destiny.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, *Six Characters* is the study of worlds, calling into question different issues through ontology, a chief postmodernist concern. The poetics of the work foregrounds ontology as one of its major concerns, and, as a result, it creates ontological indeterminacy, confusion, and instability in the play. Thus, it could be claimed that the ambiguity and curiosity of the situation in the play is due to ontological foregrounding in its structure. The ontological ruptures induced by the text happen centrally within the projected world of the work, though the outside actual world of Pirandello is tried for accessibility too. As such, as demonstrated above, certain postmodernist elements are recognized in Pirandello's play, hence *Six Characters* as a (proto-)postmodernist dramatic work whose structure has been shaped by the question of ontology.

Although ontology was discussed as Pirandello's concern in his play, the question of epistemology also plays an essential role in the formation of the play, and it should not be thought to have been avoided in Pirandello's poetics. At certain points in *Six Character* the epistemological questions are raised simultaneously with the ontological ones, that is, both epistemological solutions and ontological solutions are required to see through things. In other words, the reader hesitates between an explanation in epistemological terms and one which deals with ontology. The epistemological issues are mostly noticeable in dialogues of the Father as he has a philosophizing intellect. This could be explained in the light of what was stated earlier: one way to evade reality is through reason and consciousness – the Father is highly conscious and noticeably uses his faculty of reason. However, these issues are beyond the scope of the present study, but they can reveal further significant points about Pirandello and his drama.

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