

The Existential Void and Absurdist Form in Luigi Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author

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Abstract

This study examines Luigi Pirandello's seminal play, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), through the dual lenses of existentialist philosophy and absurdist theatrical form. Written in the disillusioned aftermath of World War I, the play dramatizes profound themes of existential anguish, the search for meaning, and the absurdity of human existence. Pirandello's work prefigures key existentialist concepts, such as Jean-Paul Sartre's "existence precedes essence," while simultaneously pioneering meta-theatrical techniques that destabilize the boundaries between reality and illusion (Esslin, 1961). The characters, trapped between life and art, become potent symbols of existential alienation and absurd futility, mirroring humanity's struggle to find purpose in an indifferent universe. This paper argues that *Six Characters* serves as a crucial precursor to both the Theatre of the Absurd and the philosophical frameworks of Albert Camus and Sartre, establishing it as a foundational text for understanding modern identity and existential resistance.

Keywords: (Luigi Pirandello, Existentialism, Absurdism, Meta-theatre, Identity).

الفراغ الوجودي والشكل العبثي في رواية لويجي بيرانديلو "ست شخصيات تبحث عن

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في المسرحية الأساسية لويجي بيرانديلو "ست شخصيات تبحث عن مؤلف" (١٩٢١) من خلال عدسي الفلسفة الوجودية والشكل المسرحي العبثي. كتبت المسرحية في أعقاب الحرب العالمية الأولى التي اتسمت بالخيبة، وتصور موضوعات عميقة مثل الكينونة الوجودية، والبحث عن المعنى، وعبثية الوجود البشري. يسبق عمل بيرانديلو مفاهيم وجودية أساسية، مثل مفهوم جان بول سارتر "الوجود يسبق الماهية"، بينما يرسخ في الوقت نفسه تقنيات مسرحية ما بعدية تهدم الحدود بين الواقع والوهم. (Esslin, 1961) تصبح الشخصيات، المحاصرة بين الحياة والفن، رموزاً قوية للاغتراب الوجودي والعبثية غير المجدية، مما يعكس كفاح البشرية لإيجاد هدف في كون غير مبالٍ. تدعي هذه الورقة أن مسرحية "ست شخصيات" تمثل سابقاً حاسماً لكل من مسرح العبث والأطر الفلسفية لألبير كامو وسارتر، مما يؤسسها كنص أساسي لفهم الهوية الحديثة والمقاومة الوجودية. الكلمات المفتاحية: (لويجي بيرانديلو، الوجودية، العبثية، ما بعد المسرح، الهوية).

1. Introduction

Luigi Pirandello's "Six Characters in Search of an Author" was written in (1921) that the Dilemmas or the complication of identity and the meaning being in a post-war world where traditional rules collapsed. The psychological shock and trauma after the war . The play's six characters— Father, Mother, Step-Daughter(illegal), Son, Boy, and Child— can represent existentialist and absurdist themes together since the play discuss both the philosophy of being and the absurdity of continuity , reflecting

Pirandello's examination of reality, art, and human existence (Esslin, 1961, p. 23).

This paper analyzes how Pirandello combines existential philosophy (e.g., Sartre's "existence precedes essence") with absurdist theatrical techniques and features to explore the dissolution of modern identity. We can see through the writing, especially this play, the mixture of absurdity, which is clearly evident to those who know its characteristics and features, and also with the state of loss or mental nonattendance escorting the personality or the human spirit, especially after the Second World War, which was considered one of the biggest unnatural changes that happened on the earth, the action of which can be known through the severe and exterior results that appeared from it. This created a kind of psychological and social lack of harmony for the contemporary human being, so he began to live in a state of imbalance that the writers translated through the two sides of the same coin, which are absurdity and existentialism, and thus the absurdity of existence was formed. Despite their differing foundations, Absurdism and Existentialism complete each other in forming the image of modern humanity. The Existentialism answers "How should we live?" through selection while Absurdism answers "Why live at all?" through revolt. As Camus famously declare "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."

While Sartre distilled it thus: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself."

2. Aims of the Study

This research aims to:

1. Analyze the integration of existential philosophy and absurdist theatrical techniques in Pirandello's work.
2. Explore how existential themes—including identity, anguish, and alienation—are dramatized through the characters.
3. Investigate the play's absurdist dimensions, particularly its use of meta-theatricality and narrative fragmentation.
4. Demonstrate how Pirandello's work prefigures and influences subsequent existentialist and absurdist thought.

3. Research Questions

1. How does Pirandello utilize existential philosophy and absurdist techniques to explore the dissolution of modern identity?
2. In what ways do Absurdism and Existentialism complement each other in portraying the modern human condition?
3. How does *Six Characters* anticipate the philosophical and theatrical concerns of later Absurdist and Existentialist traditions?

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on:

1. **Textual Analysis:** A close reading of the play to identify and interpret key themes and elements.

2. **Comparative Analysis:** Examining the philosophical works of Sartre and Camus to elucidate Pirandello's foreshadowing of their ideas.
3. **Contextual Analysis:** Situating the play within its historical post-WWI context.

5. Theoretical Framework: Existentialism and Absurdism

5.1. Historical and Philosophical Context

Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) was written in the aftermath of World War I, a period when traditional values, religious constants, and faith in progress lay in ruins. This existential vacuum led to the emergence of philosophies that faced life's evident meaninglessness. As Martin Esslin noticed, the Theatre of the Absurd appeared as a reflection to the collective "derangement" wrought by "endless wars," which led humanity to question "God and their reason for being on Earth" (Esslin, 1961, p. 23). The Characters' shattered identities mirror the psychological and so.

5.2. Key Existentialist Concepts

Key tenets relevant to this study include:

- **Existence Precedes Essence:** Humans define their essence through choices and actions (Sartre, 1956). Humans exist first and define their essence through choices, contrasting Aristotelian essentialism. Aristotelian essentialism answers the question: "What makes a thing what it is?" by emphasizing the fixed, intrinsic properties that

determine its identity and purpose in the universe. This is against adaptation of our play .

- **Anguish (Angst):** The dread arising from the freedom and responsibility to define oneself in a meaningless universe (Sartre, 1956, p. 68). The dread arising from absolute freedom and responsibility in a universe without inherent meaning (Sartre p68). That means we feel We feel scared because we can choose and we don't know what are the Consequences of our choice .We didn't know fear before that .
- **Absurdity:** The conflict between humanity's search for meaning and the universe's indifference Camus, A. (1942). The myth of Sisyphus (p. 24).The human looking for answers all the time , but actually no specific answer is available , this is wasting of time and efforts .
- **Authenticity:** Living in accordance with one's self-defined essence despite external pressures.

Pirandello before Sartre and Camus He realized it with literary intuition concepts. The Father in the play explicitly mimics existential principles and thought :

"Man is a conscious subject, rather than a thing to be predicted or manipulated" . Pirandello, L. (1921). Six Characters in Search of an Author (p. 6). That means the Man is aware and he is coexistent with his knowledge and with his lack of knowledge .

5.3. Absurdist Theatrical Form

The Theatre of the Absurd, as defined by Esslin, rejects realistic narrative in favor of:

- **Meta-theatricality:** Blurring the lines between reality and illusion. Characters invade a rehearsal, exposing theatre's artificiality. The theater for theater , even if it is a sort of absurdum .the play within play shows the existence that precede the function of being or the embodiment , this the role of theater but in non-logical one
- **Fragmented Narrative:** Rejecting linear plotlines. The Characters' story is fragmented, illogical, and culminates in unresolved tragedy (suicide, drowning) and this against or not similar to the traditional function of the narration . The function of narration is to explain or to anticipate the end after awhile ,in here is not as usual. "The tragedy of the Characters is not presented, it is only reported... It happens offstage, and we are left with its incomprehensible aftermath." (Bentley, Eric. "The Theory of the Stage." In The Playwright as Thinker, p. 157).
- **Tragicomedy:** Merging humorous and tragic elements. The fusion of tragedy and comedy you described is the central mechanism of this genre. Esslin argues that in a universe devoid of meaning, the traditional forms of tragedy (which presuppose a meaningful cosmic order) and comedy (which relies on social norms) are insufficient.

The Absurdist playwrights instead use tragicomedy to present the human condition in its raw form (Esslin 24):

- **The Tragic:** The profound despair, alienation, and futile struggle of characters trapped in a meaningless routine. (e.g., Waiting for a Godot who never comes).
- **The Comic:** The ridiculous, illogical, and repetitive nature of that very struggle. (e.g., Two men arguing over a carrot and a turnip).

6. Analysis and Discussion

6.1. Existential Analysis of the Play

A. Existence Preceding Essence

The Characters in this play embody Sartre's principles many years before its formal articulation. This principle or Literary doctrine is Created by an author who left them, they exist without fixed essences: "We have no reality outside this story" (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1922), Act I, Scene 1.. they were not completed , dependent on an author to explain their purpose. The Father complain this ontological instability: "The FATHER. Do you really know who you are?" Pirandello, Six Characters, Act II., challenging the Manager (and audience) to confront their own uncompleted identities. Their search for an author shows humanity's quest for outer validation in a universe freed from inherent purpose. As the Father insists, it is a "real crime" that their creator or finder "no longer wishes... to put us into a work of art" Pirandello, Six Characters, Act III., leaving them in existential

limbo. The writer of their story left them without putting them in their matrix .They were created but their creation was not completed ,they were looking for their essence according to the Sartre .

B. Anguish and the Burden of Freedom

The Characters experience profound anguish aroused from their trapped freedom: they possess consciousness the have awareness the don't have agency to change their predetermined narrative who creates them without achieve his doing . The Step-Daughter knows she will be forced into prostitution; the Son anticipates his alienation will lead him to suicide. This generates existential horror . The Father expresses this universal condition: "The very earth under your feet is sinking away from you when you reflect that... this present reality of yours—is fated to seem a mere illusion to you tomorrow?" Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, trans. Edward Storer (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1922), Act III.35. His philosophical speeches represent attempts to "cry aloud the reason of my sufferings." Pirandello, *Six Characters*, Act I.5, using reason to impose meaning on absurd suffering—a fundamentally existential struggle. The writer of the play explains his philosophy that tells us the being is done and the characters exist, but the rest is unknown or is not clear; this shows the absurdity of existence .Sometimes the literature tells the futures' theories and actions before happening .

C. Authenticity vs. Inauthenticity

The Characters illustrate the stress between authenticity and societal roles. The Father incarnate bad faith (Sartre): he justify his attempted incest as a "moment of weakness," refusing to let it define him because "persona is constantly changing". He looks for authenticity through self-justification narratives, yet still besieged by his "character" as recognized by others (e.g., the Step-Daughter's fixed judgment). Conversely, the Mother suffers silently, representing indirect anguish without thinking —arguably a more "authentic" response to absurdity but also more disabled . The Son's refusal to act ("I shall act nothing at all" 5) shows rebellion against inauthentic familial roles, mirroring Camus's defiant absurd hero. They cant take an act or perform as a reaction; they know the ability, and this is the idea or the main theme in Absurdity.

D. Alienation

Alienation permeates the play: the Characters are alienated from each other, from their creator (symbolizing a godless universe), and from society, as their true tragedy cannot be authentically represented by the Actors. This reflects the existentialist focus on the isolated individual in a blurred world, where, as Pirandello notes, "we think we understand each other, but we never really do" (1921, p. 5).

6.2. Absurdist Dimensions of the Play

A. Absurdist Form as Meaning

Pirandello's form is inherently absurdist. The meta-theatrical premise destabilizes reality itself. The narrative is fragmented and illogical, culminating in unresolved tragedy. The bare stage becomes a powerful symbol of the void. These techniques reject artistic order in favor of representing life's inherent chaos, directly influencing later Absurdist (Esslin, 1961).

B. Futility and Predetermined Fate

The Characters are obliged to play back their tragedy, echoing Camus's Sisyphus. They have "detailed knowledge about how their story will end" yet still without any determination to change it. The Step-Daughter must become a prostitute; the Boy will shoot himself. This unstoppable fate apply absurdity—their struggles are both "foreknown and completely shocking", highlighting life's sever carelessness. The Manager's failure to perform their story records the futility of art (or reason) to impose order on chaos. As Pirandello concludes, their "ultimate failure" mirrors Sisyphus's endless task: people "never reach an explanation about this world that will satisfy them". (Esslin 295).

C. The Absurd as Theatrical Reality

the climax of the play comes through —the drowning of the Child and Boy's suicide— place/set side by side with the Manager's separation ("pretence") with the Characters' authentic grief. This conflict reveals the absurd disjunction between daily experience and artistic representation. Despite being fictional, characters are "more real" than actors.; They are experiencing "truer" but illusory suffering.. This paradox embodies absurdity: "nothing our eyes witness is the truth", Pirandello, L. (2004). *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (J. M. Dent, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1921). p. 61. yet we must move this confusion

7. Conclusion

This research has demonstrated the profound philosophical and theatrical connections between Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and the absurdist doctrine in general and since we discuss the absurd theater it is logical to mention Albert Camus as well and his first absurd play. ' *The Myth of Sisyphus* , that highlighting their shared exploration of existential and absurdist themes. Pirandello's play, with its meta-theatrical shows collapse of reality and identity, works as a dramatic precursor to Camus' philosophical meditation on the absurd. Both works confront the human condition—Pirandello through the unresolved anguish of his characters, and Camus through the defiant perseverance of Sisyphus.

While Pirandello exposes the futility of seeking fixed meaning in an illusory world, Camus goes a step further by proposing a conscious embrace of life's absurdity as an act of rebellion. Together, these texts illustrate how literature and philosophy intersect in their examination of freedom, performance, and the search for purpose in an indifferent universe.

Ultimately, this study underscores the enduring relevance of absurdist and existentialist thought in understanding modern human struggles. Pirandello's theatrical innovation and Camus' philosophical insight remain vital frameworks for interpreting the tension between artistic expression and existential defiance. Future research could further explore how later absurdist dramatists (such as Beckett or Ionesco) expanded upon these foundational ideas, deepening the dialogue between stage and thought

The writer of six characters in search for an author anticipates the absurd ideas for many years before Camus . His prophecy based on his literary skill . He indicates the function of literature in the real life .It is not just a mere writing . It is a sort simulation to the real life ,the hidden side that is not easy to be shown .The both describe the absurd aspect but in deferent ways . Pirandello's play dramatizes existential crisis that Camus later established . Their works still influence discussions on meaning, performance, and human agency.

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