

# Self-Identity in Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

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**ABSTRACT:** The main discussion in this paper is to show how Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) in his *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) presents the problem of identity in a dramatic life. In his modern tragicomedy play, Pirandello criticizes the image of a family being just alive in a life without having any clear notion of their "I"s; it refers to the individuals who escape from their realities because they do not know their own real personality. In this play there seems to be no clear I; the characters try to find their authors in order to rewrite their life because the reality of their illusion about their "I"s needs a kind of review or recognition. Pirandello portrays a symbolic play to show direct and indirect sorrow of people suffering from deluding themselves. This paper reveals different aspects of the characters' personality by searching in their acts and dialogues to find that how lack of self-identification can change the reality to illusion. Considering Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) concepts of identity, based on his classification of unconscious into id, ego and superego as basic levels of self-recognition, the present paper searches for different ideas about the relationship between identity, reality and illusion; and it investigates abstract notions of self-identity in this play. It wants to show how Pirandello's characters—as some modern individuals—are suffering from a kind of unawareness of their self-identities, of their role in their lives and how their unawareness from their "I"s affects the others consciously and unconsciously.

**Keywords:** I, Identity, Illusion, Reality, Self-identity.

## INTRODUCTION

The beginning of twentieth century with new concepts in different aspects of science, especially human sciences, changed the way of thinking and indeed new notions about human beings examined their meanings in a modern way. Scientists, anthropologists, archaeologists, psychologists, artists and writers, especially in literature, tried to fill the wide gaps and dark spaces of doubt about human beings by studying different layers of human's mind in different periods of history. Luigi Pirandello was one of the writers who tried to challenge different fixed concepts and asked about the quality of each individual being. He, like his contemporary absurdist writers and dramatists, tried to open new doors of intellect and delight for human's soul and challenged new ways of understanding and perception. He invited people to think about their self-identity in new different ways and also put emphasis on the potentiality of human mind to recognize their existence. He tickled men's minds with a kind of scepticism about their identity and looked into the darker parts of each mind and also searched for a kind of collective unconscious in order to motivate people to recognize their real I.

Pirandello played with different aspects of human psyche in order to change the mechanical way of thinking of what he himself believes as intellect. Although his plays begin with an image (as like symbolic arts do) but the image remained alive and create a good combination between fantasy and reality. The audience can see that by his dramatic gift, "Pirandello has effectively found a way to give the abstractions of reality the stage demands" (Styan, 80). His *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921, *Six Characters*), like his other works, shares the notion of identity and challenges the audience's minds to ask themselves who the people really are. In this play there is no

real 'I', no intermediary fictionalized figures, but the characters of the father, the step-daughter and even the son, represent confounding individuals who could be too wise or even lucky for having such ability and intellect to ask about their "I"s. They have enough intellect to value themselves as a person, rather than as a set of constructed images, designed to please someone who believes in them as a real character. Although other roles have been played in this play, the characters have accepted their common role in life, like changeable identities and this illusion has satisfied them and has made them to prefer being actors rather than a character with an exact self-identity. Sigmund Freud discusses the phenomenon of identity and believes that each individual's identity depends on three major levels of unconscious, named id, ego and superego. He states that any neglect in developing of each of these three levels could change the balance between them and if id or ego could not complete their growth in mind and in the unconscious part of their mind it might create a big gap in identifying peoples' identity; and the transcendental 'I' in superego level can never ask this question that who am 'I' really.

Pirandello plays with the notion of self-identity wisely and the traces of modern thoughts about relativity in his works are clearly visible. In his recent timeless play, he wants to make his audience—during all the times—to think differently about their inner "I"s and think about their identity more exact than before. Even though some notions in one generation can have an exact, fixed meaning that may never change—some notions like the identity—there are some others which from one generation to another one, while having new mind and thoughts, reconstruct them in order to ask new questions about their new thoughts. In the twentieth century marked by the idea of modernism, a consciousness of being new, self-identity gets new meaning; in this era the delicate or circumspect treads in knowing about uncanny concepts are completely removed.

Pirandello's audience in modern time are modern men with modern way of thinking, some people disagree with another 'self', some modern bodies with new minds whose beliefs could destroy surfaces and open inner places, inner wounds, and inner emptiness. In his time, 'relativity', as a rule, challenges men's minds, creates new questions about fixed concepts in human's lives, answered by persuasions or traditions, and occurs again in the shadows of doubt. Pirandello presented one of the earliest formulations of his relativist position in the essay "Art and Consciousness Today" (1893), in which he argued that "the old norms have crumbled and the idea of relativity deprived almost altogether the faculty of judgment" (qtd. in Caputi, 15). Among these questions, the new way of thinking about the relativity of reality and truth faces modern men with some great questions about their self-identity. Pirandello believes in the potentiality of human mind, on the other hand, the acceptability of the art, especially a touchable, illustrative and direct art like movie and theatre. He used psychological methods and trusted his delight and even the thirsty minds of his audience in order to help them be familiar with their perfect "I".

This paper attempts to show the footsteps of Freudian psychoanalytical views about different dimensions of each individual's self-identity in Pirandello's work. The aim of this study is, by paying attention to the notion of identity as defined by Freud, to examine the concept of self-identification in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Based on Freudian psychoanalytical view the emphasis is on the unconscious determinants of behaviour and the primacy of early childhood experiences, on the dynamic interaction of the components of the psyche as they move through psychosexual stages of development. They, indeed by the use of defence mechanisms, protect the ego. Freud's psychoanalytic model has three major components that the first one is the structure of the personality.

In Freud's model of personality, the ego is the aspect of personality that deals with reality. While doing this, the ego also has to cope with the conflicting demands of the id and the superego. The id seeks to fulfill all wants, needs, and impulses while the superego tries to get the ego to act in an idealistic and moral manner. Accordingly, when the ego cannot deal with the demands of men's desires and the constraints of the reality, it results in a kind of fear from the reality. The most common way of reducing this anxiety is to avoid the threatening object, so someone with incorrect recognition of his self being which lives in the illusion of his reality always escapes from the reality of his inner world.

The concepts of identity first discussed in Freud's essay, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in 1920 and later in 1923 completed and elaborated in another essay "The Ego and Id." In it he argued that the representation in the mind of the real world is not a simple image of things and it should be another part stated elsewhere, more than id and ego which he called superego. He believed that this last part with id and ego could change the notion of identity (Freud, 1962: 18). It means every individual's identity is just a starting point for the more complete aspect of his real 'I'.

The word 'identification' can be understood in "two ways: transitively, 'to identify', and reflexively 'to identify (oneself) with'; and Freud uses the word in both these senses" (qtd. in Laplanche and Pontalis, 205). In *The Language*

of *Psychoanalysis*, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis declare that the term 'identification', with its both common and philosophical usage and in psychoanalytic language, is used by Freud in order to identify the notion of self-identity. They believe that in Freud's view "identification in the sense of the procedure whereby the relationship of similitude—the 'just-as-if' relationship—is expressed through a substitution of one image for another" what is described by Freud as characteristic of the dream-work (Laplanche and Pontalis, 206). In Freudian view 'identify yourself' and 'identify oneself' are moving in parallel. In his work, "the concept of identification, comes little by little to have the central importance which makes it, not simply one physical mechanism among others, but the operation itself whereby the human subject is constituted"( Laplanche and Pontalis, 206).

As Freud has claimed, if man believes in what is described as 'multiple personality' that caused different identifications in the unconscious part of an individual, man may come to some disruptions about the concept of ego and when he believes that in all human being there are many persons, his view of identity can change. He believed that distances in an individual's identity and his ego are some barriers between the notions of "id" and "ego" and his more developed "I" or the "superego" (Freud, 1962).

Accordingly, through Freud's psychoanalytical views, the problem of self-identity, in its complete meaning, is a mixture of the conscious or unconscious of each individual which shows that the identity of all persons come from their beliefs and their experiences of truth. He also believes that when man can answer this question that what is the illusion and what is the reality, then he may answer this question that who he really is. This paper focuses on the concepts of identity based on Freud's approaches on illusion, reality and identity, as their borderline.

### **Self- identity: "the illusions of a reality"**

Exploration in the human's mind and seeking for a way to escape away from the scared of overhanging in illusion is an old problem, as old as the history, but Luigi Pirandello like his contemporaries, tried to face modern individuals with the relative concept of recognition and more exact self-recognition. His attempts were to examine fixed notions in order to reconstruct new believers. He used different features of expression to show that "the life is full of infinite absurdities" and that an individual comes "to life in many forms, in many shapes, as tree, as a stone, as water, as butterfly and as a woman" (*Six Characters*, 11) in order to put emphasis on the illusion of a reality here named identity. The unknown reality of the life and the illusion of known identity are both challenged by Pirandello. The characters in this play are divided into two groups; the actors who pretend to be in a kind of delusion without any special identity who "want to be. They pretend to be" (*Six Characters*, 30) real persons and as F. A. Bassanese, in *Understanding Luigi Pirandello* (1997) argues "whereas the Characters damned life through art, the Actor speaks of illusion and the artful imitation of life within a tightly structured organism" (222). There are six family members who were looking for an author to help them live even "for a moment" (*Six Characters*, 10). Two key characters, the father and the step-daughter although for different goals—looking for their authors, their ends, their identities in their lives to discover their real 'I', in order to find a responsible factor for their sorrow, their regret and their disgust. They are suffering from blindness and being alive "like a fool" (*Six Characters*, 22). The father, the central voice among the characters, believes in determining role, determined the identity of each character when he says: "the drama is in us" and "we act that role for which we have been cast, that role which we are given in life" (*Six Characters*, 10). He also believes that no one—even if he can pretend in the best way—can get his role and identity and adds: "It will be difficult to act me as I really am. The effect will be rather— apart from the make-up— according as to how he supposes I am, as he senses me— if he does senses me—and not as I inside of myself feel myself to be" (*Six Characters*, 32). The father believes in a character as a determined person born with his role in life with the duty of showing his role in the scene of life:

The Father. How can we understand each other if the words I use have the sense and the value I expect them to have, but whoever is listening to me inevitably thinks that those same words have a different sense and value, because of the private world he has inside himself too. We think we understand each other: but we never do. (*Six Characters*, 52).

They want to interpret again crucial moments of their lives, claiming that they are truer than the real characters. The characters as that much real that no one can be in their part even for a moment and this self-identification as a personal experience makes a character too different from an actor.

None of the characters here have any nameable identity at all. They are suffering from being 'nobody' but the actors enjoy being 'somebody'. The six characters hope to be able to draft their play and change the tragic result of their fixity to reality of their lives. In this play there is no name and all the characters just recognize each other by their life role, as 'Mother', 'Father', 'Manager' and even 'Actors'. Moreover, the mother does not have a real identity at all. She is a nebulous character who is far from being perfect, that "her drama lies in her children" (Starkie, 208); a reproductive object or better to say, an Other rather than a M(other).

The step-daughter—as the name shows—is not a real daughter and even though she plays the role of a sexual partner—she is not a real one—she is not a real wife. The awareness of the father about his unreal self-identity and his incompleteness makes him seek for an author. He is a middle-aged man who put an end to his mistakes, and devoted his youth to his wrong decisions, to his desires but he is far away from his real role in life. He searches for his soul, his mind, his reality and his “I” in order to escape from being nobody. He himself could not be a real husband and a real father at all and it may cause a doubt in him to ask himself, his family and the others to help him find out what his real role in life is, or what he is living for. Although he is aware of the notion of the self-identity, the question about the modality of his “I” is what makes him distressed. He insists on being accepted as a representative of reality, a real person who desires to know who he is: “a character, sir, may always as a man who he is,” but he himself does not know actually who he is (*Six Characters*, 48).

Pirandello believed that such kinds of suffering from the absence of self-knowledge may hurt just some individual's soul and mind, someone like the father, in society:

The Father. I know that for many people this self-blinding seems much more ‘human’; but the contrary is really true [...] the animals suffer without reasoning about their suffering. But take the case of a man who suffers and begins to reason about it. Oh no! It can't be allowed! Let him suffer like an animal, and then—ah yet, he is ‘human’! (*Six Characters*, 51).

He wants to show how ‘living’ is different from ‘being alive’ and how self-recognition in this life might be the borderline of humanity and animality. In Freudian view, the animal part of the mind is ‘The Id’, the instinct-driven part that motivates passions and emotions and also makes snap decisions (Freud, 1962: 24). Though as Pirandello claims suffering without reasoning is like living like animals, just living with the unconscious part of the mind, without thinking about any transcendental being and the self-identification for those who want to save themselves from animality. It is so much painful that some prefer to suffer like an animal and just some curious intellects—like the Father—and in a long process could stand that.

Freud retained the concept of the rational ego, but subjugated it to three severe masters: the unconscious instincts, the punitive superego, and the demands of external reality. The notion of personal identity with this view is not far from the situation Pirandello provides in his play. In this play there are six characters whose unconscious part of minds are superior to their rational part and they are all living with their emotions. But suffering from lack of identity and a reasoning mind makes the characters look for their authors in order to ask about their real “I”s.

Freud believed that there is no need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection and he also believed in mother as the first object of love (Freud, 1920: 51). In this play, among Pirandello's six characters, the children are never satisfied with their parent's love, even their existence and they do not have any real parents at all. The Son never experiences his father's love and also never feels his father's existence in his life and as Freud believed, there is nothing more important than a father's love for a son. Pirandello reconstructs the psychological view of self-identity through searching among illusion and reality and creates his characters confounded in their trip passing their id to ego and superego.

### ***The Real ‘I’ and the Unreal ‘I’***

Among Pirandello's central themes, the problem of identity, the ambiguity of truth and reality, are compared with most of absurd dramatists who tried to show the meaninglessness of physical life. But Pirandello has opened the door of hope with the key of intellect, the key of self-recognition. In this play, he does not want to show only the reality or unreality of life, but he goes further and emphasizes the wrong recognition of the reality of self-identity. This play represents a life in which, although there is a play that must be played, there are no real actors and no real author at all; in contrast, there are real ‘I’'s that play their actual role and the reality of their identity are in doubt. The characters, in this play, are confusing the audience and they are finding themselves between the reality and illusion. It is also playing with the unconscious part of each audience because they are the real and unreal characters at the same time. Witnesses of this charismatic play see some characters who are aware of their existences, their beings and the big deception they are living in as the ‘Life’, but the greatest pain of living for nothing or living without being anybody—or worse being nobody—makes them change their unreal “I”s to real “I”s.

The dead kids here—moving like alive ones—make the depth of illusion deeper and on the other hand, their silent existence warns the audience about the silent realities around them, some ones or some things which are dumb and need to see more exactly. These mute kids reflect the determined and delusive notion of each individual's identity that has been projected on people in order to convince them accept some reality with no question about their validity or modality. These dumb mobile kids may be symbols of realities in each person's life which are moving with them and can have an effect on their lives but in silence. Something like people's self-identity, which is lives with all individuals—or better to say which has been carried by them—often, may affect their real ‘I’'s but unawareness about this identity may cause them be drown in the pool of fate with no recognition about the goals of life. The contrast

between the absolute solitude of the characters and the gap after recognizing the two kids' death may make each audience ask him/herself that who I am really. By creating such a range between dead and alive characters, Pirandello creates an objective situation in which the identity missed its meaning. In this way, the play shows the deep meaning of self-identity hanging between reality and illusion.

In this play there are both fictional and real characters at the same time. The fictional and real father, mother, step-daughter and kids, but none of them can accept his/her existence or reality. The father cannot accept the role of husband so he leaves his wife and goes away and then he cannot accept the role of father because he lives in an imaginary world through making a kind of unreal identity for himself but he finds out that he cannot continue living in illusion:

Father. Ah! Disdains debasing liaisons! Not old enough to do without women, and not young enough to go and look for one without shame. Misery? It is worse than misery; it's a horror; [...] and when a man feels this...one ought to do without, you say? Yes, yes. I know. Each of us when he appears before his fellows is clothed in a certain dignity. But every man knows that uncomfortable things pass within the secretory of his own heart. (*Six Characters*, 18)

the climax point of her sorrow and living in a world between illusion and reality of the happened event and in an unreal world she is living in:

The Step-Daughter. Shame indeed! This is my revenge! I am dying to live that scene... The room... Here is the window with the mantles exposed, there the divan, the looking-glass, a screen, there in front of the window the little mahogany table with the blue envelope containing one hundred lire. I see. I see. I could take hold of it. (*Six Characters*, 14)

On the other hand, one can see the 'Mother', who prefers to be hibernated in delusion of reality and to play the role of a determining character without speaking, but just complaining; for this reason, she has the fewest dialogues in the play: "The mother is unaware that she is incomplete and not alive, and so totally fictional, fixed and passive in her own world" (Styan, 81). The pressure on her common and traditional mind is too much more than what she can stand, so she prefers to live in the shadow of reality instead of reality and maybe she accepts to be "as tree, as a stone, as water, as butterfly and as a woman" (*Six Characters*, 11) because her weak, fragile and traditional mind prefers to escape from her ego. The unreal "I" that she makes for herself is just a deception that helps her escape from finding reasons for her mistakes. She is nothing at all and never was because she always decides based on her emotions, and according to Freud, based on her unconscious part of her mind. She is not a real mother, real wife or even a real widow as Pirandello writes:

The Manager [dumbfounded]. I don't understand at all. What is the situation? Is this lady your wife? [To the father]

The Father. Yes, gentleman: my wife.

The Manager. But how can she be a widow if you are alive? (*Six Characters*, 12).

She does not believe in herself as an "I" and she sees her individuality incomplete without the others. She speaks always about two dead kids, however, she is aware of their death, but as she says, the illusion of existence of the kids makes her believe in herself or makes her feel alive: "They cling to me to keep up my torment actual and vivid for me. But for themselves, they don't exist, they aren't anymore" (*Six Characters*, 44).

The actors even prefer their unreal identity because they will get rid of their unwanted desires and even satisfy some of their desires in a kind of illusive life. The woman actor prefers living in her role, instead of living with her character because just in that way she could be the beloved of the male actor. Although there are no special dialogues, there are a lot of acts created by Pirandello that shows his attempts to reflect his effort in creating such a situation in which the characters represent their meaningless lives.

Freud, in his letter to Wilhelm Fliess, mentioned that "being entirely honest with yourself is a good exercise" (Freud 1961: 3), but none of the characters in this play are honest with themselves; in fact, none of them could adapt himself for the role born in and just try to escape from reality to illusion what Freud believes as an escape from life to death. As Freud states each individual's identity is rooted in his id and as the unconscious part of his personality, but the superego or the ideal ego will never exist if a man is not aware of his inner "I", so there would be no self-reorganization or self-identification at all. He also claims that this self-identification happens when someone is looking for his "I". *Six Characters* shows a free challenge for each individual to get rid of his mistakes and look for his inner self. It goes to light the way of intellect for the modern minds to escape from the darkness of the world they trapped in and wants to save human being from a woven web of illusion they are involved in.

## CONCLUSION

Pirandello used the familiar metaphors of life as a stage and the individual as a player to convey philosophical insight into the human condition in the modern world. This playwright dramatizes several continuing themes throughout his literary production: the fluid mutability of identity, the interaction of reality and illusion and the

relationship of life and art. His special view to human identity in most of his works—and in his *Six Characters* particularly—is part of his attempt to implicate his audience in a story narrated by modern individuals and he wants to reconstruct new human beings with the ability of recognizing themselves. He creates a scene with characters and actors to exemplify “the dialectical rapport of form and life” (Bassanese, 106-107) to mirror the relative concept of identity and to show different potential of human’s mind for understanding their self-beliefs. He tried to change or at least affect the modern drama moving in the way that helps the world to change. While he uses fantasy as his base of inspiration, one may call his writing method, symbolist, but “he declared that he hated symbolic art, which in its need to be allegorical destroyed all spontaneity” (Styan, 80).

The analysis and dissolution of a unified self are carried to an extreme in his *Six Characters* where the stage can be the symbol of appearance versus reality. Pirandello portrays the notion of self-identity as the border line of reality and illusion and tries to emphasize that when someone answers what is reality and what is illusion then he can answer who he really is.

Though Pirandello finishes his play in a kind of delusion and sorrow, his attempts in searching for an author are not only making a cliché scene in which some common individuals looking for their own identity to answer their personal questions, he is indeed looking for the notion of human self-identification generally. And it is in *Six Characters* that one “finds the most dramatic representation of the delusion of personality” (Starkie, 42). As Pirandello shows in his play, the lack of self-identification causes misunderstanding of the world and the other human beings. Pirandello tries to show that not only the reality of characters is deeper than that of the actors but also it is deeper than the reality of the real people. He puts emphasis on reality and illusion, form and life, understanding and lack of understanding and places objectivity against subjectivity.

Pirandello tries to play with the language as a strong tool—and the genre of drama as a more touchable genre—to convey the deep suffering a real man or an intellectual man uses to stand in order to save himself from a horrible self-storm, to find a real shore out of the dark seas of illusion. His attempts are to portray a family, which is ready for metamorphosis, for changing, for understanding about their self-identities. Therefore Pirandello is not an absurd dramatist of his own time, rather he is an intelligent dramatist who reminds people to play their role at all the times and asks them to look for their authors.

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