Chapter II

Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*: A Pastiche of the Old and New Technique in Drama

In contemporary dramatic criticism Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) is “…suffering fashionable rejection without ever having had-outside Italy-widespread fashionable acceptance” (Bentley vii). Despite Pirandello’s reputation as a prominent dramatist, there have been relatively very few studies and translations in English of his large oeuvre of essays, novels, poems, and dramas. Despite the omission the Nobel Prize winner is one of the greatest writers in the history of Italian literature.

Pirandello’s plays are widely appraised both by the public as well as critics and continue to be staged in a large number of countries in varied languages. Such universal recognition is remarkable for a playwright. Thomas Bishop termed his works as “difficult” (Bishop xvii) and observes that wide acclamation is rare for such an abstruse dramatist. To substantiate his observation he continues that the content of Pirandellian theatre is intellect oriented. The themes of reality and illusion, the mutability and multiplicity of human personality, the conflict between life and art and the essential conundrum of producing a work of art persist in his plays. Pirandello dexterously blended the artifice of the theatre with the reality of life. His plays brought singular ideas into the realm of modern drama.
The drama of ideas which foregrounded a detailed description of contemporary life and culture of people from all echelons of life and society no longer appealed to the Italian public. The experience of war had already familiarized them with the thrill of the ‘Grotesques’ and its multiple auguries. The infuriated futurist became incensed opponents and completely condemned the past. Pirandello was the most serious of them and he categorically disapproved the conventional norms of old sentimental theatre. His plays with grotesquely comic tone sounded the knell of old drama. Speaking in high admiration, Starkie says that with his peculiar philosophical way of looking at life he is placed apart and calls him a “giant amidst these Lilliputians” (9). Thus ‘teatro grotesque’ was a reaction against the old sentimental drama that had ruled the stage over the years. The concept of the Grotesque theatre together with the futuristic philosophies had spread throughout the theatrical world through Pirandello’s literalism and one can witness in every country the death of bourgeois well made plays together with the inception of a new critical idiom which is the manifestation of modern theatre mentality. The drama brought to Europe by Pirandello is cerebral and intellectuality is its hallmark.

The “Encyclopedia Britannica”, defines the well-made play as a drama adhering to certain strict technical principles that dominated the stage in Europe and the United States for most of the nineteenth century. The technical formulas called for a very complicated and highly artificial plot based on a secret known to audience but withheld from certain characters, a climactic scene in which all the difficulties are solved, and a happy incul-de-sac. Hermon
Ould defined “a well-made play” as, “the play which conforms to certain reasonable, well tied rules and does not seek to break away from accepted practice.” (Ould 42). A likely believable dramatic situation is indispensable to such plays. No amount of inventiveness can save a play if it is implausible as the audience fails to believe in a situation which is innately impossible or absurd. Under such conditions it became imperative to have a script, proper stage settings, actors, producers and lights. A series of events in a logical connectivity were scrutinized before being produced before the audience. Non-realistic dialogues with lofty expressions and elevated language became an essential prerequisite to the well-made play.

A glimpse into the tormented life of Pirandello reveals severe financial crises coupled with the mental breakdown of his wife. Nevertheless, the adversities of private life did not hinder him. Before attaining recognition as a famous playwright, he wrote a large number of successful novels and short stories. Expertise in the art of sharp compression, adept characterization and abrupt climax form a part of his later dramatic technique.

The vicissitudes of his life had a direct impact on his art. It is hard to separate Pirandello the artist from Pirandello the man. They are so closely homogenized that a scrutiny of his art necessitates an intimate understanding of the playwright. He began his literary career as a poet progressing to short stories and novels and finally reaching fruition in theatre where one can witness his genius as an artist.
After the detachment and objectivity of Realism and Naturalism in the earlier stages of his career, Pirandello turned his attention to serious treatment of humour and grotesque. To him the tragic sense combines with the comic to produce the essence of humor. He felt that if a humorist laughs; there is a semblance of grief in his laughter. Demolishing the dividing line between laughter and grief the dramatist based his writings on these psychological dimensions in the human psyche. Starkie maintains that “the true protagonist of the Pirandellian theatre is King thought” (32). He quoted Pirandello from an address at Barcelona in 1934 where explaining the theatre strategy adopted by him the playwright observes:

People say that my drama is obscure and they call it cerebral drama. The new drama possesses a distinct character from the old: whereas the latter had as its basis passion, the former is the expression of the intellect. One of the novelties that I have given to modern drama consists in converting the intellect into passion. The public formerly were carried away only by plays of passion, whereas now they rush to see intellectual works (Starkie 33).

With his brilliance, intellect and powerful imagination he transformed (his characters) them into the stillness of his art. And for the manifestation of his philosophy, he revived the old tradition of commedia dell’arte which originated in Italy in 1550. It was characterized by the use of stock characters.
A kind of improvised stage show commedia dell’arte was basically an actor’s drama. The author provides for the ‘scenari’, an outline framework, for the actors who with their skills and proficiency, replenish the act with stock phrases and stock actions. The reaction of the audience is also made part of the dramatic structure. To entertain the audience the authors of the scenari constructed weird plots and ensnared them to an extent that resolving seemed virtually impossible. But to audience’s surprise, the end unravels the truth. Pirandello operated on the mechanism of commedia dell’arte but the plays moved a stage further. Hence, in Pirandello’s plays the actors are of prime importance.

Pirandello has always been preoccupied with the problem of personality. He illustrated that there are as many logics and reasons as there are individuals. The individuals appear to him in double, triple, in multiple forms because there is no fixed personality. The readers locate the most dramatic portrayal of the delusion of personality in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. The guilty father says:

> For the drama lies all in this – in the conscience that I have, that each one of us has. We believe this conscience to be a single thing, but it is many-sided. There is one for this person, and another for that. Diverse consciences. So we have this illusion of being one person for all, of having a personality that is unique in all our acts. But it isn’t true. We perceive this when tragically perhaps, in something we do, we are as it were, suspended,
caught up in the air on a kind of hook. Then we perceive that all of us was not in that act, and that it would be an atrocious injustice to judge us by that action alone, as if all our existence were summed up in that one deed (16).

The theme of relativity of truth is developed out of contrast between reality and illusion which is the operating unit of Pirandello’s technique. This contrast between illusion and reality juxtaposing two forms of drama and two sets of people is a manifestation of the technique. Characters frozen in single emotion assert their reality over the actors’ reality which is subject to change. Just as a person’s nature is in a state of continuous flux, so is the actors’ reality. The self, changes with time, develops, imbibes new experiences, sometimes retreats to contemplate on old one, but never remains stable. Thus art is more real than life because it is not subject to changes that constitute life. It is fixed and therefore immortal. For instance the playwright explicates in the Preface, the tragic encounter at Madame Pace’s between the Father and the Step-daughter:

If the father and the daughter began their scene over one hundred thousand times in succession, always, at the appointed moment, at the instant when the life of the work of art must be expressed with that cry, it would always be heard, unaltered and alterable in its form, not as a mechanical repetition, as a return determined by external necessities, but, on the contrary, alive every time and as new, suddenly born thus forever! embalmed alive in its incorruptible form... All that lives by the fact of living, has a
form, and for that very reason it must die – except the work of art which lives forever in so far as it is form.

The flux and movement of life is trapped into moments, transformed into drama and are presented on stage. As it was difficult to present the ever changing reality through realistic drama therefore he chose adlib which can accommodate truth and multiple personality of individual.

_Six Characters in Search of an Author_ Pirandello’s best known endeavor at dramaturgy astounded theatre practitioners with its singular technique, complex and cerebral quality and pitiful grim human tragedy. The playwright provides the crux of the play in the ‘Preface’

The delusion of mutual understanding… is the passion and torment… of each one of them.

The play opens with a rehearsal of one of Pirandello’s own drama titled _Mixing it up_. A disgruntled troupe of actors is trying to rehearse for the aforementioned play. The setting is a theatre where the actors, producer, prompter, light man have assembled to practice their parts. Suddenly the rehearsal is interrupted, with the arrival of six people on the stage. They call themselves ‘characters’ and claim to carry a drama within themselves. An enigmatic aura surrounds them and intensifies the confusion. Pirandello introduces the six characters as the Father, the Mother, the Stepdaughter, the Son, the Young Boy, and the Little Girl. They are literary characters created by an author who left them to protect themselves. And their desperate search for
an author led them to the theatre. They insist that they be allowed to perform their drama, claiming to be a creation of the author’s fancy who created, abandoned and condemned them to incompletion. They were searching for an author who would complete them, and demand to relive the act in which they were frozen. The drama that begins is ‘a play within a play’ wherein the dexterity of the playwright exhibits his themes of appearance and reality, life and art, and the problems of artistic creation, with a dramaturgic exercise of juxtaposing the conventional realistic theatre with the unconventional impromptu experimentation of the commedia dell’arte and teatro grotesco. The characters carry an innate vivacity. It becomes obvious from the very beginning that an actor created illusion is being engineered through a well written script and traditional props. In contrast to this deliberate effort a presentation of theatrical inversion without the customary anchors is taking place right in front of the audience. On the surface it involves no support to sustain the dramaturgic contents. “The playwright thus categorically demolishes the myth of theatre but refrains from allowing a replacement by another fabrication” (Ahmed 56).

‘Play within a play’ or ‘in-set play’ as it is termed now, is a device wherein some of on stage dramatis personae adopt the role of actors and present the play to the rest of the crew who become the audience. Kenneth Pickering observes that:

“It is now seen as an aspect of meta-theatre: theatre that concerns itself with the nature of theatre, and it is interesting to explore just
how frequently the theatre has both examined and celebrated its own nature in various ways” (40).

The earliest known examples of play within a play are found in Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy (1589) followed by Shakespear’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1595). The technique may be derived from the metaphor of the world as a stage. The concept displays the impediments that are encountered while producing a play. ‘The real audience is watching an on-stage audience watch the same play that they are watching’ (Pickering 42). The playwright endeavors to make the audience observe and analyze its own role.

Heightened reality is achieved when the audience watches actors in the process of creating a play: this double theatricality draws attention to the meta-theatrical nature of the activity and investigates the states in which it is no longer possible to discern life from art. When we see a play within a play it is as if we were putting the concept of theatre itself under microscope (Pickering 42).

The play is a demonstration of the mechanical nature of the well-made play, its artificiality and moral flaccidity placed adjacent to the drama of improvisation. The adlib of unrealized characters is the vital part of the play. Creations of imagination they exemplify values and feelings akin to human aspirations and apprehensions and conflicts. In Pirandello’s opinion, had they been given a life
on stage they would be more real than life itself. The preface explicates the process of the birth of characters from the playwright’s imagination:

This little maidservant of mind, Fantasy, several years ago, had the bad inspiration or ill-omened caprice to bring a family into my house. I wouldn’t know where she fished them up or how, but, according to her, I could find in them the subject for a magnificent novel.

Ultimately through that entire process they had become ‘alive’ to the level that they are tangible, so alive that they are given a form by the playwright in a short story, novel or a play. But they were left unfinished. Though they had not yet met definite artistic form, still they carry a drama within themselves, a drama that makes them dramatic characters:

… every creature of fantasy and art, in order to exist, must have his drama, that is a drama in which he may be a character and for which he is a character. This drama is the character’s raison d’etre, his vital function necessary for his existence (Preface).

Their drama bears a resemblance to late nineteenth century romantic play, in plot as well as in spirit.

As Pirandello describes them, the Father is a fifty year old man with a pale high forehead, thinning reddish hair and sharp clear eyes. He is the central figure in the family’s eventual tragedy as well as conflict of characters with actors. The Mother seems to be worried and terrified, overcome by her burden
of shame and humiliation. Dressed like a widow with her eyes constantly
downcast, she is completely passive. Pirandello calls her “nature”. The
Stepdaughter is eighteen years old, arrogant and aggressive. She is beautiful
and she knows it and makes her opinions known. The Son is twenty two, and
his contempt towards the family is made clear throughout the play. The Young
Boy is fourteen years old but appears to have the same mental level as the
Little Girl. Not much is known about them and they speak silent.

The story of these vibrant figments of playwright’s imagination emerges
spasmodically from the outbursts of the Father and the Stepdaughter and
occasionally the Mother and the Son. The Father who married this poor simple
woman soon begins to realize that he can no longer communicate with her.
Having already sent his son to the country, he slowly detaches himself from the
family. The father makes a grand gesture of sending the Mother with the
Secretary. One of the reasons was the Mother’s unspoken shared bond of
understanding with the secretary. But he continues to show interest in the
extended family. On discovering about the family and stepdaughter’s school he
gradually starts satisfying himself by offering gifts. This increasing nearness
frightens the Mother and they move to another city.

With the unfortunate death of the Secretary the family is forced to return
to the native city. Faced with severe economic crisis the Mother finds job as a
seamstress at Madame Pace’s outwardly respectable retail shop for designer
garments. The shop is a brothel where the Stepdaughter is forced into
prostitution to ensure the family’s survival. The climax of the characters’
catastrophe lies in the encounter of the Father with the Stepdaughter. The Father as a client to the Stepdaughter is interrupted in the act by the Mother who saves them from shame. After the discovery, the Father takes them home. The grown up Son is indifferent to the Mother and he condemns the two children as illegitimate treating the Father with constraint and reservation. The intensity of the Mother’s pain is felt by her two small children who clutch her hands tightly. The little girl drowns and the young boy shoots himself, but the predicament of others remains unresolved.

Their anguished story unfolds sporadically through the three acts. The reluctant producer finally agrees to let the characters live their roles on stage and later the actors assume the part of six characters on the stage. But the attempt is a non-success as the actors merely feign as characters whereas the characters had actually lived their life in the roles. The reality of the latter is but masquerade of the former. Hence the drama of the six characters first done by characters themselves through impromptu is again performed through another inversion in which the characters become the audience and the actors play the drama with a difference. For them the script has been written and the stage has been prepared.

The drama began in chaos and concludes is chaos. The Boy’s suicide is baffling and only the Father knows his reality– the point at which he is frozen by the author.

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? (52)

Reviewed from the point of view of dramaturgy, a deliberate conflict is introduced in the genre. Each member of the alienated family is an isolated individual operating within their self-contained domain. These distinct perimeters encroach or overlay the common areas of related human activity and give rise to an encounter which is a basic functional unit of any drama form. A clash between the actors of the organized rehearsal of a well-made play and the six characters who represent the unrehearsed drama is deliberately staged at the very outset. The play also encompasses numerous dramaturgically maneuvered altercations among the six characters and the actors. This inherent discordance is manifested in the layers of illusion and reality which are constantly contending to eliminate the counterpoint. The hostile clashes between characters and actors, on the one hand and among the improvisers themselves on the other hand enables the playwright to employ inversion as theatre technique and place art against life, illusion as opposed to reality, rationality in contrast to irrationality and cold logic against frenzied outbursts. These conflicts foreground the different forms of drama moving simultaneously.
The play opens when the curtain goes up and the spectators find the stage in a state of disorder. The rehearsals of Pirandello’s play *Mixing It Up* is in progress. This seems to be purposeful and symbolic because the dramatist ‘mixed’ the two modes of theatre in the play. The actors were rehearsing the play which was fashioned as old bourgeois well-made play. It gets interrupted by the characters whose drama is of improvisation. The subtitle implies growth and development as actors and characters are involved in an unresolved venture and thus ‘comedy is in the making’. The playwright reverses the traditional model of assigned roles based on written script, prompter’s book, props, lights, sets, furniture, action, exits, entrances and actors who synchronize to accomplish the perfect illusion of reality. The appearance of the Six Characters discontinues the realistic drama of the original actors.

The stage is arranged with the essential prerequisites of realistic conventional drama. The opening dialogue between the manager and leading actor communicate the significance of the script and the author.

LEADING MAN (to manager). Excuse me, but must I absolutely wear a cook’s cap?

THE MANAGER (annoyed). I imagine so. It says so there anyway (pointing to the “book”)

Moreover, the producer and his team supposedly accustomed to performing conventional sentimental, romantic plays of the turn-of-the-century bourgeois
theatre fail to comprehend the avantgarde “Pirandellian Theatre”. The manager complains:

THE MANAGER *(jumping up in a rage).* Ridiculous? Ridiculous? Is it my fault if France won’t send us any more good comedies, and we are reduced to putting on Pirandello’s works, where nobody understands anything, and where the author plays the fool with us all? *(The actors grin. The Manager goes to the Leading Man and shouts)* Yes sir, you put on the cook’s cap and beat eggs. Do you suppose that with all this egg-beating business you are on an ordinary stage? Get that out of your head. You represent the shell of the eggs you are beating! *(Laughter and comments among the actors.)* Silence! And listen to my explanation, please! *(To Leading Man)* “The empty form of reason without the fullness of instinct, which is blind” – You stand for reason, your wife is instinct. It’s a mixing up of the parts, according to which you who act your own part become the puppet of yourself. Do you understand?

LEADING MAN. I’m hanged if I do.

THE MANAGER. Neither do I *(2).*

At this juncture the six characters enter the stage. They are creations of the author’s fancy, hence a ‘dream-like’ effect in the guise of green light is
created on stage. The purpose lay in distinguishing the two sets of people present.

‘A tenuous light surrounds them, almost as if irradiated by them – the faint breath of their fantastic reality.’

They had a fixed reality. Each one of them is fixed in one emotion which is one part of a personality. Pirandello employed this technique of splitting different attributes of a single complex personality where distinct characters embody distinct aspects of a single personality called the ‘role-playing technique’. The Father embodies remorse, Mother shame and pure feelings, Daughter defiance, Son scorn and the two children lack awareness. The technique is akin to commedia dell’arte. Having frozen in one single emotion, the characters extemporize on stage. They produce their own stock actions and stock phrases within the provided ‘scenari’, the roles in which they are fixed. Regardless of the number of times the characters enact their part the emotion remains the same.

The Characters proclaim to be more real and assay to capture the stage to enact the drama they profess to carry within themselves, thus demolishing the concept of author.

**THE MANAGER (furious).** I am rehearsing, and you know perfectly well no one’s allowed to come in during rehearsal!

*(Turning to the Characters:) Who are you, please? What do you want?*
THE FATHER (coming forward a little, followed by the others who seem embarrassed) As a manner of act… we have come here in search of an author…

THE MANAGER (half angry, half amazed). An author? What author?

THE FATHER. Any author, sir.

THE MANAGER. But there’s no author here. We are not rehearsing a new piece.

THE STEP-DAUGHTER (vivaciously). So much the better, so much the better! We can be your new piece.

AN ACTOR (coming forward from the other). Oh, do you hear that?

THE FATHER (to Step-Daughter). Yes, but if the author isn’t here…

(To manager) … unless you would be willing (4).

The playwright conveys that work of art is more significant than its creator. It was apparent from the beginning that the actors produce an illusion with the aid of traditional props and deliberate effects. Opposed to this, an exercise of theatrical inversion is going to take place before the audience. The illusion is created and destroyed. The author abandoned them (characters) and “the orphaned though recalcitrant figures imbued with live germs from the
strong fantasy that nourished and fortified them refused to wane and subside” (Ahmed 56). An outlandish argument that explains the entire subject is as follows:

THE FATHER. … one is born to life in many forms, in many shapes, as tree, or as stone, as water, as butterfly, or as woman. So one may also be born a character in a play.

THE MANAGER (with feigned comic dismay). So you and these other friends of yours have been born characters?

THE FATHER. Exactly, and alive as you see! (Manager and actors burst out laughing).

THE FATHER (hurt). I am sorry you laugh, because we carry in us a drama, as you can guess from this woman here veiled in black.

THE MANAGER (losing patience at last and almost indignant). Oh, Chuck it! Get away please! Clear out of here! (To property man:) For Heaven’s sake, turn them out!

THE FATHER (determined, coming forward). I marvel at your incredulity, gentlemen. Are you not accustomed to see the characters created by an author spring to life in yourselves and face each other? Just because there is no “book” (pointing
to the Prompter’s box) which contains us, you refuse to believe:…

THE STEP-DAUGHTER (advances towards Manager, smiling and coquettish). Believe me, we are really six most interesting characters, sir; side-tracked however.

THE FATHER. Yes, that is the word! (To Manager all at once:) In the sense, that is, that the author who created us alive no longer wished, or was no longer able, materially to put us into a work of art. And this was a real crime, sir; because he who has had the luck to be born a character can laugh even at death. He cannot die. The man, the writer, the instrument of the creation will die, but his creation does not die. And to live forever, it does not need to have extraordinary gifts or to be able to work wonders (5, 6).

With arguments and coaxing, the characters convinced the manager and actor to listen to their drama. Though this unpremeditated audience evinces interest in the family drama of the six characters as it has the essence of the bourgeois sentimental theatre, yet they can never be expected to ascertain the complexity of these ‘characters’ and the issues they embody as ‘characters’. The drama of improvisation starts:

THE FATHER. … But if you and your actors are willing, we can soon concert it among ourselves.
THE MANAGER (*annoyed*). But what do you want to concert?

We don’t go in for concerts here. Here we play dramas and comedies!

THE FATHER. Exactly! That is just why we have come to you.

THE MANAGER. And where is the “book”?

THE FATHER. It is in us! (*The actors laugh*) The drama is in us, and we are the drama.

The reader is reminded of the commedia dell’arte, its stock character and the scenari with which the participants are provided. This is followed by conflict a major component of drama, among characters manifested impromptu on stage. The Father was involved in an emotional tussle with the Mother, Step-Daughter, and Son, and the Mother is in conflict with the Son and the Step-Daughter. A long but spasmodic speech by Step-Daughter establishes the scuffle and enlightens the readers to a tale of anguish:

THE STEP-DAUGHTER (*to Manager*). Worse? Worse? Listen!

Stage this drama for us at once! Then you will see that at a certain moment I … when this little darling here … (*takes the Child by the hand and leads her to the Manager*) Isn’t she a dear? (*Takes her up and kisses her*). Darling! Darling! (*Puts her down again and adds feelingly*) Well, when God suddenly takes this dear little child away from that poor mother there; and this imbecile here (*seizing hold of the Boy roughly and...*
*pushing him forward*) does the stupidest things, like the fool he is, you will see me run away. Yes, gentlemen, I shall be off. But the moment hasn’t arrived yet. After what has taken place between him and me (*indicates the Father with a horrible wink*), I can’t remain any longer in this society, to have to witness the anguish of this mother here for that fool.

(*Indicates the Son*) (7)

The discourse could be analyzed as a prologue to the drama of the six characters. Responding to her speech the Mother faints. The actors surprisingly inquire:

Is it true? Has she really fainted?

Hence the readers witness the power of imagination. There exists a very thin line of demarcation between illusion and reality that the actors find hard to discern. The playwright very artistically creates the illusion of reality on stage. Further, the actors question the Mother’s mourning. “But how can she be a widow if you are alive?”, asks the Manager. The answer gives rise to another story. Gradually, the characters take over the stage and actors start taking interest in their drama. Now the characters capture the stage and the actors become the audience.

LEADING LADY. We are the audience this time.

THE MANAGER. (*Beginning to get really interested*) Let’s hear them out, listen (9).
The Son calls his Father’s actions ‘the Demon of Experiment’. The phrase carries twofold connotations. It could refer to the husband’s decision of sending the Mother with the second man. The second is the dramaturgic experiment by the playwright. The play begins with an acting troupe rehearsing for a play with realistic settings. It is suspended due to an unexpected appearance of the six characters on the stage. Their life on stage is seen through Pirandello’s use of the play-within-a-play technique. Thus the encounter of the actors with the characters is the external play and the catastrophic story of the six characters is a play within the external play. The author rejected the characters without casting their story into a definite artistic form.

But while rejecting them as characters in that tearful bourgeois play, he cast them in another play, a deeper, more modern play, the play of the rejected characters in search of an author, whose real drama is the need and the difficulty of human communication (Mariani 47).

The play has been operating at two levels. At one level the playwright explores the method and the problems of artistic creation which juxtaposes life and art. At another level, the readers witness the breakdown of values and communications, guilt, transcendental dilemmas and morals. The playwright revived the old Italian drama form commedia dell’arte and put it adjacent to the traditional drama in vogue. The evaluation of the two contrasting techniques adds to grotesqueness. It allowed Pirandello to be more innovative and made use of the technique of play within a play so that he could accommodate very
inventively rather a weird drama of the six characters. In order to underscore the differences between the two forms of drama the dramatist introduced several conflicts within the genre. The creatures of the dramatist’s fancy appear as real as any living creature can be. They can talk and even defend themselves. They assert being more real than life and are intellectually superior. To prevent ‘mixing up’ of the two sets of people on stage, the playwright used mask for the characters:

“The elemental difference between the Actors and born characters lies in the fact that the latter are residue of imagination existing outside the work of art even though they carry the burden of their drama. The Actors on the other hand labour at creating the spectacle of reality ably assisted by standard props of the trade. When the former stay charged with a vital essence of eternal existence the latter is imparted ephemeral life from a marginal substructure (Ahmed 57,58).

The masks were designed not to appear otherworldly or ghostlike but as created realities rooted in author’s fancy as devices more genuine and consistent than actors’ illusions. The dramatist inverted the traditional parameters, the characters relived their drama which moves sporadically in bits and pieces, produced at the spur of the moment giving the effect of improvisation. Throughout the play the playwright peeps into the human psyche and explores different sections of the human mind. He brings the audience face to face with some startling situations so that they sit up and think.
Act I concludes with the characters capturing the stage from the manager and his troupe. The actors are not fully convinced of the practicality of the reversal theatre craft where play-acting precedes the written script. In a complete dramaturgic retraction the actors who create the effect of illusion become the audience of a drama which is against the norms of conventional stage play. The second act begins in a similar manner. The stage is prepared for the rehearsals of the characters’ drama.

THE MANAGER. Fix up the white parlor with the floral decorations. Two wings and a drop with a door will do.

....

THE MANAGER (to Property Man). Just have a look, and see if there isn’t sofa or divan in the wardrobe...

PROPERTY MAN. There’s a green one.

THE STEP-DAUGHTER. No no! green won’t do. It was yellow ornamented with flowers-very large! And most comfortable!

PROPERTY MAN. There isn’t one like that.

THE MANAGER. It doesn’t matter. Use the one we’ve got.

THE STEP-DAUGHTER. It doesn’t matter? It’s most important!

(23)

The stage is set, the prompter is asked to write down the dialogues of the characters which the actors would enact later. An inversion of the old form of
drama is thus taking place before the audience. The script prompted drama is replaced by an impromptu performance that later becomes the script. The improvisation of the character would later be a conventional drama for the actors to act on stage:

THE MANAGER (to Prompter). You follow the scene as we play them, and try and get the points down, at any rate the most important one. (Then addressing the actors:) Clear the stage ladies and gentleman! Come over here (pointing to the Left) and listen attentively.

LEADING LADY. But, excuse me, we…

THE MANAGER (guessing her thought). Don’t worry! You won’t have to improvise (24).

The story of the six characters enthralled the Manager. After listening to the family the Manager decides to recreate a play from the content provided by the six characters. The actors who are not acquainted with the novel technique of impromptu seek for a written script which is to be dramatized. The prompter is asked to write the script for the actors to enact in the realistic setting of the backroom of Madame Pace’s shop. The Manager assures the actors that their script has been prepared. An argument between the characters and actors explains the issue further:

THE MANAGER. All right: “characters” then, if you insist on calling yourself such. But here, my dear sir, the characters
don’t act. Here the actors do the acting. The characters are there, in the “book”...when there is a book!

THE FATHER. I won’t contradict you; but excuse me, the actors aren’t the characters. They want to be, they pretend to be, don’t they? Now if these gentlemen here are fortunate enough to have us alive before them… (25).

Besides the two major modes drama, that is, the old sentimental drama and the improvisation by the characters, drama is happening at several different levels. The outer play, that is the rehearsal of one of Pirandello’s; the internal drama of the six characters; the encounter of the actors and characters; and lastly the actors adopting the roles of characters to perform their story are the multiple levels where drama in being enacted in one form or the other. These layers of dramatization form a part of Pirandello’s technique of writing a play. As the play progresses, one encounters a plethora of conventions of well-made play placed against the impromptu drama. The concept of grand hero has been ridiculed and other norms are also disregarded. The actors prepare themselves to play the role of the characters. This back and forth repositioning by the actors in the drama of the characters gives the effect of alienation. This is followed by a series of arguments among actors and characters both claiming priority and distinction over the other. The illustrations are:

THE MANAGER. …your soul or whatever you like to call it takes shape here. The actors give body and form to it, voice
and gestures. And my actors—I may tell you—have given expression to much more lofty material than this little drama of yours, which may or may not hold up on stage. But if it does, the merit of it, believe me, will be due to my actors.

THE FATHER. I don’t contradict you, sir; but, believe me, it is a terrible suffering for us who are as we are, with these bodies of ours, these features to see…

THE MANAGER. …The make-up will remedy all that, man, the make-up…

THE FATHER. …But the voice gestures…

THE MANAGER. …On the stage, you as yourself, cannot exist. The actors here acts you, and that’s an end to it!

THE FATHER….now I think I see why our author who conceived us as we are, all alive, didn’t want to put us on the stage after all (26).

The technique is constantly developing and each method is staggering. By reversing the conventional boundaries the dramatist presents the glimpse of life from standpoint of the ‘visitants’ who assume improvisation in a fresh dramaturgic experiment. The appearance of Madame Pace, the mysterious seventh character is yet another aspect of startling stagecraft. She does not come with the rest but demonstrates dramaturgically before the twin audience
the magic of the stage and the power of imagination conjuring a figure. The entire process of creation has been shown on stage. How a character comes into existence from the author’s imagination into a concrete form is displayed for the viewers to see and analyze. The sudden appearance of Madame Pace amazes the actors and to their surprise the Father comments:

“…why are you so anxious to destroy in the name of vulgar, commonplace sense of truth, this reality which comes to birth attracted and formed by the magic of the stage itself, which has indeed more right to live here than you, since it is much truer than you…” (29).

Concerning the birth of this character and the manner of its creation Pirandello explicates in the Preface to Six Characters:

The birth of a creature of human fantasy, a birth which is a step across the threshold between nothing and eternity, can also happen suddenly, occasioned by some necessity. An imagined drama needs a character who does or says a certain necessary thing; accordingly this character is born and is precisely what he had to be. In this way Madame Pace is born among the six characters and seems a miracle, even a trick, realistically portrayed on the stage. It is no trick. The birth is real. The new character is alive not because she was alive already but because she is now happily born as is required by the fact of her being a
character. She is obliged to be as she is. There is a break here, a sudden change in the level of reality of the Scene, because a character can be born in this way only in the poet’s fancy and not on the boards of a stage…I have gathered it up again into my own fantasy without removing it from the spectator’s eyes.

That is, I have shown them: instead of the stage, my own fantasy in the act of creating—my own fantasy in the form of this same stage.

Thus Madame Pace mysteriously comes to life among the six characters. The death of two children is equally mystifying. To some it is an illusion because the Characters’ drama is demonstration of art, while others insist on the boy’s reality. It is unclear whether the children will reappear having completed their roles in the dramatic act. The illusion appeared more real than reality. Beings of imagination, the characters jostle and search for realization and theatre is the place where they can find that fulfillment. The drama of characters provides a contrast between life and art.

The curtain falls abruptly indicating the end of Act II. When it is lifted, the stage is set for the last act. The Manager and the Leading lady appear preparing in accordance with the traditional norms of drama. The characters interrupt and the act ceases to be realistic. The author assigns discrete dimensions of reference to the actors and characters separating “operational illusion” and “illusionary illusion” of the characters from the innate reality of
the actors as human beings and the virtual reality of their enactment (Ahmed 73). The characters manifest a complete inversion of the script prompted actors. These stage players have to conform to a screenplay and the directions of the director, who is a central figure, supervising, coordinating and instructing. He teaches them to create an illusion of reality on stage. The characters have no such predominant personage. Their drama is a spontaneous performance wherein each contributes to the total effect. The spasmodic and sporadic outbursts, in the furtherance of discourse, from the characters is a deliberate strategy on Pirandello’s part to create an effect of extemporization and adlib. The playwright demonstrates a variety of techniques through which illusion is created. The performance of actors generates illusion but remains objectively alienated whereas the six characters who claim to carry their drama within them become the reflections of their own image. The emergence of Madame Pace is also a demonstration of stage magic that will disappear after the allocated time. Similarly the audience marvel at the death of two children that whether it is pretense or reality. The situations illustrate that a negligible border exists between fantasy and reality.

Language has always been an important device in understanding modern drama. In this play it provides the platform to the two modes of drama. The family drama of the characters is in the familiar naturalistic language of bourgeois theatre. The language they used is realistic while revealing their story. The illustrations are:
THE STEP DAUGHTER. …do you know, sir, what that woman did when brought her back the work my mother had finished?
She would point out to me that I have torn one of my frocks, and she would give it back to my mother to mend (15).

The manager and his company who represented bourgeois drama also use the familiar naturalistic language.

THE MANAGER. …is it my fault if France won’t send us anymore good comedies and we are reduced to putting on Pirandello’s works, where nobody understands anything, and where the author plays the fool with us all? (2)

But when they tried to imitate or talk about modern theatre, they caricature a critical language which is not lucid and graspable:

THE MANAGER. …do you suppose that with all this egg-beating business you are on an ordinary stage? Get that out of your head. You represent the shell of the eggs you are beating!... “the empty form of reason without the fullness of the instinct, which is blind.” – you stand for reason your wife is instinct. It’s a mixing up of the parts according to which you who act your own part become the puppet of yourself. Do you understand?

LEADING MAN. I’m hanged if I do.
THE MANAGER. Neither do I (2, 3)

But the Six Characters change the language entirely. A close reading of the text illustrates the manner in which the playwright employed language to deal with complex aesthetic questions. Given to the characters the language manifests the enthusiasm, the closeness and the vivid imagery of dynamic conversation. The discourse is often punctuated by frequent exclamation marks and ellipses:

THE STEP DAUGHTER. I won’t stop here! I won’t! I can see you’ve fixed it all up with him in your office. All this talk about what is possible for the stage…I understand! He wants to get at his complicated “cerebral drama”, to have his famous remorses and torments acted; but I want to act my part, my part! (37)

THE FATHER. Well, to make seem true that which isn’t true…without any need…for a joke as it were…isn’t that your mission, gentleman! (4)

Rhetorical questions, frequent use of interjections and vocative for example: ‘eh’, ‘sir’, ‘yes sir’, ‘please I beg you’, ‘nothing sir’, ‘just so,sir’, ‘no pardon me’, ‘I was thinking about you sir’ and many more. These ornamentations produce the feeling of close proximity to realistic conversation. Similarly the frequent disruptions in the flow of the dialogues by parenthesis give the same effect. Umberto Mariani examines the speech of the Mother, the most instinctive of the characters, as an expression of “the difficult ideas of the
eternal actuality of the torment, is broken into very short sentences, explosive fragments of thought expressed almost exclusively through exclamations, a sequence of short, sharp cries of grief.” (Mariani, 46)

It’s taking place now. It happens all the time. My torment isn’t a pretended one. I live and feel every minute of my torture. Those two children there – have you heard them speak? They can’t speak anymore. They cling to me to keep my torment actual and vivid for me. But for themselves, they do not exist, they are’nt anymore. And she (indicating Step Daughter) has run away, and has left me, and is lost. If I now see her here before me, it is only to renew for me the tortures I have suffered for her too (39).

The frequent use of images and references lend an element of tangibility to the play. For example Umberto Mariani analyses the Father’s use of references in his statements: ‘we are here in search of an author’, as an expression of the character’s sense of lack of definite artistic form and their search for it; also he compares the reality of the creations of art to that of living persons; ‘living beings, more alive than those who breath and wear clothes’. The concrete images of Sancho Panza and Don Abbondino provides the confirmation of immortality, ‘he who has had the luck to be born a character can laugh even at death’. The dialogues of the son also exemplify imagery. For example the use of the mirror imagery is brilliant:
… haven’t you yet perceived that it isn’t possible to live in front of a mirror which not only freezes us with the image of ourselves, but throws our likeness back at us with a horrible grimace? (50)

Thus the dramatist used wide variety languages for people in order to differentiate in the genres of drama. One is the familiar realistic language in which the characters represented their drama and the other is the ideological one where the characters explain the importance of the creation of art and their role as ‘characters in search of an author’.

Analyzing the play, critic and admirer, Thomas Bishop said:

The Italian master considered the basic flaw of the theatre as an art medium: the life with which the dramatist endows his work is choked by the directors and actors who cannot live it but only perform it. Six Characters is a long interrogation on the causes which can hamper or facilitate the birth of a dramatic work (69).

On the occasion of one of Pirandello’s death anniversaries, a French periodical interviewed several French playwrights of the time about how far they were influenced by Pirandello. George Neveux a young contemporary playwright told not only his viewpoint but what the entire generation of French dramatists imbibed from Pirandello:

“Pirandello is first of all, the greatest prestidigitator of the twentieth century…”
Talking about his most important play Six Characters he comments:

he took the very centre of the real world and turned it inside
outright in front of us, as the fisherman turns inside out the skin
of an octopus to lay bare its viscera.

But what Pirandello laid bare before us is not only the work of
the actor, nor that of the author, not only the other side of the
scenery, but something much more universal: the other side of
ourselves.

Further he adds ‘it is our inner life which is suddenly found projected on the
stage and decomposed there as if by a prism’. He also analyzes the play and
opines:

What are these phantoms condemned to relive endlessly the same
scene if not the most obscure part of ourselves? These six
characters are not only the unfinished creatures of an author at a
creative impasse, but also, and more important still, those
impulses which each of us keeps with in him and does not
manage to live out.

Another critic Kaniz Khawaja Ahmed comments on the play:

Despite the managers avid acceptance to substitute the original
play hoping to exploit its melodramatic potential in impromptu
style, the play which commenced as an anti-thetical encounter
between Life and Art, is reduced to an unconvincing burlesque and a pastiche compounding subjective and objective dramaturgic constructs (76).

Therefore to conclude, in the words of Starkie:

It is the dramatic struggle in his mind between the phantoms of his reason and his fantasy that arouses our emotions and makes us throng to his theatre. He does not dictate he only discusses and suffers (98).


