

## **A Foucauldian Reading of illusiveness in Six Characters in Search of an Author by Luigi Pirandello**

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### **Abstract.**

Loneliness, horror, lost identity, lack of mutual understanding, and lack of courage and motivation are some of the unquestionable gifts of the modern life. In such a vague atmosphere social discrimination and the very negative feeling of lack of identity, is completely annoying. What all the six characters in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* are challenging with is that feeling of being and the reality of illusion which is rooted in depth of their heart. The present paper aims at investigating how such a feeling of not being important is rooted in their heart with reference to the Michel Foucault's concepts of power, identity and truth. How identity and lack of the power to distinguish reality and illusion is interrelated with these concepts, is the main crucial issue of the present study. In order to get the best result the drama has been studied precisely and lots of different books regarding Foucault's ideas and the concept of identity have been well studied and analyzed. Lack of self-recognition and being under dominant are unpleasant and it sounds even the worst when people become aware of such a shortage. Dissatisfaction caused by limitation explores an unconscious feeling of being lost and revenge which is destructive for all the six characters in the drama.

**Keywords:** identity, illusion, power, punishment, truth

### **1. Introduction**

Modern man is naturally concerned with the most important crucial issue of the 20th century; individualism. Individualism is a direct effect of alienation and solitude; a man who is alienated from society being a lonely individual, surly would think about his own self. Such an individualized person is in search of what he calls a missed identity. The process of quest for identity can be difficult, challenging and even intolerable. The very path an individual may go through to find his real reality has got different formidable stages; at last it may lead to some very unpredictable comportment such as aggressiveness, captivity, hatred or other feelings.

Modern drama despite the classical one is not dealing with society and its problems. Modern drama is in search of the lost chain of humanity and humanism which is absent in his life. Modern dramatists, breaking up all the classical conventions are in search of something new to satisfy the needs of a newly born modern man. The author in a classical play is objective while in a modern one his presence is one of the musts for presentation. The characters in a modern play are different from a realistic one; they are unconsciously in search of an identity that may bring comfort to their life.

The present study is an attempt to demonstrate how Foucauldian concepts of power, identity, truth, and punishment could lead to a sort of illusiveness which is dominant in Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Foucault's name is linked with different postmodern concepts that break the traditional norms of a society. One of the most important concepts that has been argued and elaborated by Foucault is the concept of discourse which is different from its traditional definition. Carter believes that "Foucault's use of the term 'discourse' is closely related to his concept of power. The power of the human sciences (eg psychology, economics etc) derives from their claims to be knowledge" (105). Foucault's theory of power can be found in all social interactions. Foucault believes that power is everywhere and it can affect people's choices. Foucault's theory of power suggests that power is omnipresent, that is, power can be found in all social interactions. In fact that power is interwoven in all social relations. Foucault emphasizes that 'power' is not an institution, a 'structure', nor an individual capacity, but rather a complex arrangement of forces in society. Foucault concludes that power is everywhere and it affects all of our choices in daily life.

Truth is another concept which should be taken into consideration while studying Foucault's ideas. He believes that there is no truth in the world and our interpretation gives meaning to it. Identity and humanism is one of the main focuses of Foucault's theoretical ire. Identity is completely related to power as Foucault himself put it in 1977, "power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorize the individual, mark him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individual subject" (Foucault, *The Subject and Power* 781) it means identity is the result of power in society. Regarding truth, the concept of interpretation is significant. In fact, how and why something means what it means is a break with traditional

sense of truth. Foucault's idea of truth has been influenced by radical hermeneutics that emphasizes absence of truth in the world; in fact it is our interpretation that gives meaning and form to the world. In the other words, there is no absolute meaning and truth but multiplicity of meanings and truth takes over our discourses which are related to power. Likewise, every discourse is a system of truth that determines identity, subjectivity and behavior of people.

Tracing Foucault's notion of discourse in this drama and what factors affect and shape discourse are significant. Moreover, the representation of truth in the society would be analyzed based on Foucault's notion. Iara Lessa summarizes Foucault's definition of discourse as "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak" (283).

## 2. Methodology

In this part the researcher aims to first discuss briefly the main characteristics and the main notions of Foucauldian concepts to be followed and discussed in the following chapters. Hence, a clear definition of Foucault's main ideas seem necessary to be given first. Many critics were involved in cultural studies, among them Foucault stands out as the most influential one.

Michel Foucault, along with eminent figures such as Jacques Derrida, has imposed a significant influence on various branches of thought and philosophy in the later twentieth century, known as cultural studies. He also had an impact on New Historicism initiated by Stephan Greenblatt.

He was born and educated in France. At the Sorbonne University he came into contact with some leading intellectuals of the era including Jean Hippolyte, and Louise Althusser and became a communist, of course he left the party in 1953. Foucault was not interested in historiographic methods relying on cause and effect, so he developed a way emphasizing on the role of interpretation in the emergence of law and morality. So he introduced new concepts of discourse, language, text and criticism. Analyzing the discursive pathways through which power circulates was appealing to him.

According to Lois McNay Foucault's major themes are mostly the two concepts of power and subject. And all knowledge is embedded in power relations. The notion of power and its reformulation constitutes the major and constant theme of Foucault's.

Another concept which should be taken in to consideration is truth. People all the time are searching for truth. truth is a man-made concept which is not absolute and it is like a game as Foucault writes "I have tried to find out how the human subject fits into certain games of truth, whether they were truth games that take the form of a science . . . or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control" (*Subjectivity And Truth* 281).

Foucault is more interested in foregrounding resistance to power. He tries to focus on power beyond this view that power is repression of the powerless by the powerful, hence "he is more concerned about power as it is practiced within everyday relations among people and various institutions" (Mills 12).

### 2.1. Foucauldian Power.

Foucault's name is linked with the concept of power and the fact that knowledge and truth exist in relation with social, economic and political factors. Of course in his idea, this relation is much more complex than one being the expression of the other. As he mentions, "if there is Knowledge, it must renounce power" (O'Farrell 41).

Foucault's conceptualization of power is more concerned with the relation between social structures, institutions and individuals. His discussion of power is very extensive dealing with different aspects. Foucault emphasizes neither that "institution of power, or group...but rather a technique" (Foucault, *The Subject and Power* 781) nor an individual capacity, but rather a complex arrangement of forces in society.

### 2.2. Truth and discourse.

According to Foucault, power can affect shaping truth as he says that "I would say that this has always been my problem: the effects of power and the production of truth." (*Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 118) Foucault wanted to discover how our view of truth is influenced by power relationships. Foucault is concerned with the ways in which our power position affects how people see reality.

The concept "discourse" is multidimensional, broadly perceived and has several definitions. A plethora of literature notes that in the study of language, discourse often refers to the speech patterns and usage of language, dialects, and acceptable statements within a community. Discourse, as a social construct, is created and practiced by those who have the power and means of communication. Those who are in control decide who we are by deciding what we discuss.

It is asserted that, in Foucault's work, there are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations. Discourse "transmits and produces power; it undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Weedon, 107).

Discourse can be seen in the everyday practice of humans. Therefore, discourse is not only text but also action. It can be said that religion plays an important factor in Foucaultian power in which subjects can be dominated.

### 3. Research body

#### 3.1. Foucauldian reading of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Illusiveness is the very fundamental and dominant theme in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. All characters are almost drowned in a sort of vague and unfamiliar feeling of ignorant; self-ignorant that is dangerous. When they find out the truth about themselves and about the others actions and nature, they gain knowledge and this knowledge is again dangerous because again the uncertainty and a sense of being drawn between reality and illusion surrounds them. The aim of the present article is to investigate how Foucauldian concepts of power, identity, punishment, knowledge and truth may lead the characters in *Six Characters* to a very dangerous feeling of being lost in a world between illusion and reality, which could be destructive. Destruction here is equal to death; sort of revenge due to the present dissatisfaction and illusion. Tymieniecka asserts that, “The notion of illusion, contrary to reality, points to the idea of something suggested by imagination or caused by the senses’ deceit.”(3)

##### 3.1.1. A short summary of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

A group of actors are preparing to rehearse for a Pirandello play. While starting the rehearsal, they are interrupted by the arrival of six characters. The leader of the characters, the father, informs the manager that they are looking for an author. He explains that the author who created them did not finish their story, and that they therefore are unrealized characters who have not been fully brought to life. The manager tries to throw them out of the theater, but becomes more intrigued when they start to describe their story. The manager agrees to become the author for them and has them start to play the scene where the father is in the dress shop meeting the step-daughter for the first time. He soon stops the plot and has his actors attempt to mimic it, but both the father and the step-daughter protest that it is terrible and not at all realistic. He finally stops the actors and allows the father and step-daughter to finish the scene. The manager changes the setting for the second scene and forces the characters to perform it in the garden of the father’s house. The mother approaches the son and tries to talk to him, but he refuses and leaves her. Entering the garden, he sees the youngest daughter drowned in the fountain and rushes over to pull her out. In the process, he spots the step-son with a revolver. The young boy shoots himself, causing the mother to scream out for him while running over to him. The manager, watching this entire scene, is unable to tell if it is still acting or if it is reality. Fed up with the whole thing, he calls for the end of the rehearsal.

##### 3.2. Truth-knowledge and illusion

Truth is one of the important key terms that have been devised by postmodern thinkers particularly by Foucault. The truth that postmodern thinkers have devised is completely different from the traditional definition of truth. In fact, they do not believe in truth as an absolute and metaphysical fact. In fact, they believe in multiple truths in society. All the characters in the drama are searching for a truth, hidden beneath the reality of their existence. The father as an intellectual, the mother as a peasant woman and mostly the step daughter are playing an important role on unfolding the reality out of illusion.

Father’s truth is that “we want to live” (act 1) actually the father is knowledgeable enough that he knows they are almost like illusion and they – the characters – do not exist on their own, so he mentions “only or a moment.... In you.” The truth is that since they don’t have an author, they seem like a sort of illusion, a dream, they are powerless and they cannot live separately. According to Foucault, power can affect shaping truth as he says that “I would say that this has always been my problem: the effects of power and the production of truth.” (*Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 118) Foucault wanted to discover how our view of truth is influenced by power relationships. Foucault is concerned with the ways in which our power position affects how people see reality.

Even the Father mentions that there is no book. He claims that “it is in us! The drama is in us, and we are the drama. We are impatient to play it. Our inner passion drives us on to this.” That is exactly the main achievement of truth. They want to live life in its best way and they come to the truth that their existence is depends on being alive and play role. They have to replace illusion with reality in order to live, to become alive.

Mother also suffers from an internal conflict; she “prevents the Father from lifting the veil which covers her face” the veil actually can be a symbol of uncertainty and unreality. The truth is she is ashamed. She is ashamed of all the members of the family. She is ashamed of the Father since she left her and went with a man with whom she fall in love. The Father asserts “her drama isn’t a drama of love of two men for whom she was incapable of feeling anything except possibly a little gratitude—gratitude not for me but for the other.”

According to Foucault, there is a direct relationship between power and truth. Foucault mentions, “I would say that this has always been my problem: the effects of power and the production of “truth.” (*Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 118). In other words, Foucault claims that truth is shaped under power and “Knowledge is

power” (ibid.). Throughout the story it seems that the Step-Daughter wants to clarify exactly that the mother was under Father’s domination and power and that’s why she left home. Truth produces power as The Step-Daughter mentions “she tortures herself, destroys herself on account of the neglect of that son there; and she wants him to believe that if she abandoned him when he was only two years old, it was because he made her do so.”

Mother’s truth is different from the other people in the family. Mother is powerless, her truth is different; her discourse is different “you know how to talk, and I don’t; but, believe me, sir, after he married me...who knows why?... I was a poor insignificant woman...” the truth is; mother is a miserable, weak character, who doesn’t know the reality of her existence. These pauses...observable everywhere in the story in almost all character’s speeches indicate a sort of uncertainty and illusive atmosphere waving in the drama.

Foucault says, “If I tell the truth about myself, as I am now doing, it is in part that I am constituted as a subject across a number of power relations which are exerted over me and which I exert over others” (*Politics, Philosophy, Culture* 39) that is why The Father remarks “deaf, deaf, mentally deaf! She has plenty of feeling. Oh yes, a good heart for children; but the brain – deaf, to the point of desperation. Mother is herself drowned in the world of vagueness, illusion, and uncertainty even she herself doesn’t know what was best for her and her family. That is the exact reason she covered her face with veil. Father believes that though Mother is good but “if we could see all the evil that may spring from good, what should we do?”

Foucault has tried to show the ways that subjects are constituted by subject’s relationships, and the ways in which the notions of truth or rationality are constituted through power relations. This would shape how we come to view things as good or bad, right or wrong, reasonable or irrational. The Father to some extent hate the Mother and at the same time pity her “precisely what I did, sir. And then I had to watch this poor woman drifting forlornly about the house like an animal without a master, like an animal one has taken in out of pity.” Hatred also is a good reason which forces people to stay in a kind of illusive world, this illusion and uncertainty is just because of the fact that they come to a sort of new truth about themselves and the others. As The Father mentions “yes, I admit it. It was also a liberation for me. But great evil has come of it. I meant well when I did it; and I did it more for her than mine. I swear it.”

Another truth that must be revealed is about The Son; does he also live in a world of illusion or he is aware of the reality which surrounds his family. It seems The Son is completely dissatisfied with his situation and he blame hi mother and also his father for growing up alone as he claims “and I find myself not at all at ease in their company. Leave me out of it, I beg you.” “How do you know what I am like? When did you ever bother your head about me?” (act 1)

A very interesting point in Six Character is that, two characters are introduced as the Child and the Boy. These people don’t have a real identity they are actually in search of reality and identity. And finding the truth about the family is to some extent misery for these two children. The truth for the characters in Six Character is not delightful and it brings revenge, death and hatred with itself.

### 3.3. Power and illusion

Foucault’s conception of power is a central part of this work. Power is a relationship between people in which one affects another’s actions. Power differs from force or violence, which affect the body physically. It involves making a free subject do something without knowing it consciously: power therefore involves restricting or altering someone’s will. Power is present in all human relationships, and penetrates throughout society. The Father in Six Characters is a powerful person whose speeches passes the boundaries between reality and illusion. As once he mentions “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 which contains us, you refuse to believe?” these people are something between reality and truth, something between character and actor; “believe me, we are really six most interesting characters, sir; side-tracked however.” (act1)

Father talks with an authority that demonstrates he is aware of what he wants, he claims “yet they live eternally because—live germs as they were – they had the fortune to find a fecundating matrix, a fantasy which could raise and nourish them: make them live forever!”

The power of men shaped a discourse in Victorian age in which “a massive sex industry and repressive male-orientated marriage laws” (James 75) were dominant. In system of power, marriage becomes an important means; it is the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women. It implies that “men hold power in all the important institutions of society” and that “women are deprived of access to such power”. (Lerner 239). That’s why mother claims that The Father made her go with her beloved and leave her house and even his son; father is the dominant character and he was strong enough to force the mother do whatever he wants. See how The Father talks from a vertical viewpoint and humiliates The Mother; “very well then: listen! I had in my service a poor man, a clerk, a secretary of mine, full of devotion, who became friends with her. They understood one another, were kindred souls in fact...were incapable even of thinking ...”

Patriarchy is an authoritative male system that is both oppressive and discriminatory. It is oppressive in social, political, economic, and cultural environments. It is discriminatory in its control of access to power, management of resources and benefits, and manipulation of public and private power structures. This system is

rooted in the power relations since the word “patriarchy literally means the rule of the father or the patriarch”, and originally it was used to describe a specific type of “male-dominated family”. Now it is used more generally “to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways” (Bhasin 3).

The Father’s power in such a case brought evil and misery as he confesses “yes, I admit it. It was also a liberation for me. But great evil has come of it. I meant well when I did it; and the mother mentions “he took my son away from me first of all.” That is how male domination lead to revenge and hatred and suicide at the end of the novel. Once The Mother also confessed vigorously that “he forced me to it, and I call God to witness it.”

The Step- Daughter hates The Father, the Boy commits suicide while he understood the reality and comes out the illusion he was living with up to that time and the Son wants leave the family and live alone.

The most important implication of what Foucault said about power is that, power is not a thing or capacity to be owned either by State, social class, or individuals. He talks about power as a relation to be exercised. He mentions that resistance existed wherever power was exercised.

In Volume I of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that “where there is power there is resistance” (Foucault 12). So in any power relation there needs to be someone who resists. In this view Foucault does not see individuals as passive recipients, rather he focuses that resistance to oppression frequently occurs. In Six Characters the one who resist is to some extent The Step-Daughter is the one who resists. She asserts “shame indeed! This is my revenge! I am dying to live that scene...” she stands against The Father’s claims and actions; although she doesn’t show that much affection to her mother but defends her against father. She said “it isn’t true. Don’t believe it... she tortures herself, destroys herself on account of the neglect of that son there; and she wants him to believe that if she abandoned him when he was only two years old, it was because he [ the father] made her do so.” And that is exactly the reason why The Step-Daughter hates The Father.

### **3.4. Discourse, punishment and illusion**

The concept “discourse” is multidimensional, broadly perceived and has several definitions. A plethora of literature notes that in the study of language, discourse often refers to the speech patterns and usage of language, dialects, and acceptable statements within a community. The discourse used mostly at the beginning of the novel indicate that all the characters are immersed in a world of illusion and seem satisfied since the reality is revealed. The Father, feeling lost claims “as a matter of fact...we have come here in search of an author...” it seems they do not know their real place in the world but The Step- daughter is a bit different and says “so much the better, so much the better! We can be your new piece.”

Throughout the drama there are some pauses [...] which exactly means illusion and uncertainty; mostly The Father uses pauses to focus on the fact that though he is powerful and intelligent, he is also drowned in a world between illusion and reality. “Well, to make seem true that which isn’t true...without any need...for a joke as it were...isn’t that your mission, gentlemen: to give life to fantastic characters on the stage?”

It seems that illusion and reality are mixed and there is no boundary; even the actors and The Manager with feigned comic dismay assert “so you and these other friends of yours have been born characters?” and The Father believes “we carry in us a drama ...” even once The Father talks like Hamlet and he mentions the notion of being and not being. He cites “just because there is no ‘book’ which contains us, you refuse to believe...”

The Step-Daughter’s discourse completely demonstrates that she is not lost in the world of reality and illusion. She can make decision better and defend The Mother and condemn The Father. “Believe me, we are really six most interesting characters, sir; side-tracked however.”

Foucault claims that a regime of truth “is that which determines the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestation of truth”, therefore the role of a subject can be determined in the power” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 91). However, the power of relations punish the subject for his own actions which is marriage; the punishment for the mother is that the father send her out with her beloved. The mother miserably tells “he took my son away from me first of all... and do free himself.”

The Son who was alone from the very childhood and was grown up in a sense of hatred and absurdity asserts “Nothing... walking in the garden...” ( act 2)ran away and let the other members of the family alone.

A very miserable punishment for almost every character which happens at the end of the novel is The Boy’s committing suicide. “A revolver shot ring out behind the trees where the BOY is hidden.” Again at the end of the play the reality and illusion are mixed up in a way no one can recognize the truth. As The Father cried “Pretence? Reality, sir, reality!” (act 2)

The whole life is a contrast between reality and illusion.

## **4. Conclusion**

Throughout whole thesis, Foucault’s ideas have been discussed. Foucault’s main concern is associated with the concept of power. He believes that knowledge and truth exist in relation with social, economic and political factors. Of course in his idea, this relation is much more complex than one being the expression of the

other. His idea of power is more concerned with the relation between social structures, institutions and individuals. His discussion of power is very extensive dealing with different aspects. Foucault proposes different configurations of power: disciplinary, biopower and then governmentality. Regarding power, it has been believed that power and resistance have been interrelated.

Foucault's theory of power suggests that power is omnipresent, that is, power can be found in all social interactions. Discourse has been another important term for Foucault. Discourse, as a social construct, is created and practiced by those who have the power and means of communication. Those who are in control decide who we are by deciding what we discuss. Foucault holds that truth, morality, and meaning are created through discourse.

Concepts of truth, power, knowledge and punishment have been studied thoroughly in *Six Characters* in the present article, and the following results have been obtained. The first and fundamental concept the researcher dealt with was "truth". Throughout the drama everything depends on the discovery of the truth about reality of life, almost all characters are involved with a kind of negative feeling of being lost and loneliness.

The drama creates a sense of doubt for both readers and characters. The fact that illusion and reality are mixed up in a very artistic way from the very beginning to the very end of the play is completely observable. But the point is that through the concepts of truth, power and discourse the characters gradually come to a sort of understanding which consequently closes them to reality about themselves and their surroundings.

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