



The Deterministic World of the Polyphonic Texts: Pirandello's Puppets in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*

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Abstract: Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* creates a discourse on the polyphonic novel where the author creates not voiceless slaves "but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of disagreeing with him and even rebelling against him" (6). According to the Newtonian mechanical universe theory, it is possible for the creator to sketch out the plot of the lives of his created beings, and any semblance of choice or free-will is only a fallacy. Therefore, following Bakhtin's definition of a polyphonic novel one may conclude that the universe of the polyphonic text is non-deterministic, where the characters are the Gods of their universe—not bestowed with a puppet-like consciousness mouthing the words of their puppeteer—having autonomy over their actions even though the plot is predetermined by the author. The aim of the paper is to determine the nature of the universe of a polyphonic text like Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and to question the degree of freedom the characters of a polyphonic text seem to possess. Also, it would be interesting to analyse if the predetermined plot of the polyphonic text nullifies the freedom bestowed upon the characters by the author—whether their freedom dwells in the realm of extremities or in the realm of relativity with varying intensities. In this context the idea of "relative freedom" (Bakhtin *Problems* 13) within a strict and carefully calculated design of a plot or narrative must also be explored, as the authorial design is overarching and all-encompassing, and traps the characters in a pre-destined universe. Despite Bakhtin's insistence on "internal independence" (*Problems* 13) the trajectory of its actions are predetermined at the moment of their conception, because a character is not born *ex nihilo*—plot or story precedes the character. Therefore, there is an irony inherent in the pre-destined freedom Bakhtin refers to. The paper would conclude with the assessment of how the issue of predetermined free-will is a crucial element in the concept of dialogism.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Polyphonic text, Characters, Author, Determinism

A Great Dialogue: Polyphonic Novel Defined

When I hear a writer talking earnestly of how the characters in his latest book 'took over the action' I am inclined to laugh.... Fictional characters are made of words, not flesh; they do not have free will, they do not exercise volition. They are easily born, and as easily killed off. They have their flickering lives, and die on cue, for us, giving up their little paragraphs of pathos. (Banville "Making" 107-8)



In Luigi Pirandello's "A Character in Distress," Icilio Saporini, a teacher, who after forty-five years had come back to Italy to die, was compelled to rely on an author to fulfil his desire (10). Just like his sudden birth from artistic imagination over which he has no control, his death too is beyond his grasp. He carries with him his story, his past, but not his denouement. In Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the characters are born yet bereft of the life-giving script; they are dependent on the author for their existence—"Imagine what a disaster it is for a character to be born in the imagination of an author who then refuses to give him life in a written script" (65). The aim of the paper is to determine the nature of the universe of a polyphonic text like Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and to question the degree of freedom the characters of a polyphonic text seem to possess.

In the tug-of-war between the theory of Newtonian mechanical universe and the Quantum mechanical universe, between free-will and determinism, the availability of wiggle room in the context of literary characters is questionable—if the characters who are dependent on the author for life, meaning and even death possess free-will or if their lives are predetermined by the author since conception. Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* created a discourse on a specific kind of novel in which the characters created by the author were not voiceless slaves, "but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of disagreeing with him and even rebelling against him" (6). In this special type of novel the "plastic and pictorial image" (Morris 88) of a character's life is not created and represented using the all-consuming consciousness of the author which encloses the character's consciousness, his feelings and desires (Bakhtin "Author" 13) in a bell jar, but rather with the help of dialogic interactions between autonomous subjects—"a great dialogue of interacting voices, a polyphony" (Morris 89). This symphony of independent yet harmonically related chorus is responsible for the nomenclature of the said kind of novel as the "Polyphonic" novel. Even though, in Bakhtin, the concept of polyphony is used exclusively to refer to novels similar to those by Dostoevsky, it is, however, applicable to any literary text where the characters are bestowed with what A. V. Lunacharsky, in "On Dostoevsky's 'Multi-voicedness,'" refers to as "that unheard-of freedom of 'voices'" (qtd. in Bakhtin *Problems* 35). The paper would thus begin with an assessment of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* as a polyphonic text.

Polyphony and Dialogy

"The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through" (40) as Bakhtin claims in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, since the polyvocality arises out of the dialogue between the multiplicity of voices. Bakhtin formulates the concept of the dialogical novel as opposed to the monological novel where the narrative is a "determination of the single consciousness of the author" (Renfrew 77), where the novel is a "monologically understood objectified world relating to a single and unified authorial consciousness" (Bakhtin *Problems* 6) and the characters are "encased in a firm and stable monological framework" (Bakhtin *Problems* 17). Thus, in a monological novel despite the multiplicity of characters, the discourse formulated by them, their world-view or even their actions are encased within the overarching, all subsuming authorial consciousness thereby rendering the characters mere objects within the discourse of the God-like author. On the contrary, in the dialogical novel the character is imbued with a "freedom, an openness that contradicts the hero's status as a 'mere' character"



(Renfrew 78). Furthermore, in a dialogical novel, according to Bakhtin, “the character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent...the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own” (Bakhtin *Problems* 5). Despite being the creation of an author the characters of a dialogical text seem to dissect themselves from the authority of the creator, trying to assert themselves as well as their ideology on top of that of their creator’s. In this context one must wonder how far or how well their ideological freedom translates into their freedom to act however they wish to. Also, it must be pointed out that from the very beginning of their conception there seems to be a contest, a fight for autonomy between the author and his characters as the authored characters become the authors of their own vision of the world, thereby highlighting a duality inherent in the nature of the actions of the character.

“Dialogism is the name not just for a dualism, but for a necessary multiplicity of human perception [as well]” (21), notes Michael Holquist and multiple perception implies multiple meanings and world-view. In the polyphonic text, therefore, “every concept, image and object lives on two planes, is rendered meaningful in two value contexts – in the context of the hero and in that of the author” (Dentith “Introduction” 8) since the discourse of the author and the character are distinct and discrete. More importantly, if the author is “renouncing the right to the last word and granting full and equal authority to the word of the characters” (Bakhtin *Problems* 6) can it not be, by extension, concluded that the author is simultaneously relinquishing his control over the actions of the characters. Consequently, it may be assumed that in a polyphonic text every action must also be realised on two planes – the characters’ predetermined actions anticipated by the author as a response to preceding and succeeding actions, and as a result of authorial design; and the characters’ actions which apparently spring out of their free-will. In the polyphonic novel, therefore, the actions of the characters must be as dialogic as their words.

In Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* we encounter six characters born out of an author’s imagination who have been abandoned post-manifestation by their author and are, thus, looking for an author who will help them change their story or at the very least will help them complete it – “We’re looking for an author....the author who created us, living in his mind, wouldn’t or couldn’t make us live in a written play for the world of art” (Pirandello *Six* 11, 14). They are not only independent enough to exist beyond the consciousness of the author, they also contest the will and consequently the authority of the author. The Father in Act Three claims and explains how once the characters are alive the author is compelled to follow their words and actions – “[The author] must want them to be what they want to be; and it’s his bad luck if he doesn’t do what they want!” (Pirandello *Six* 65). The author’s desire must be intrinsically linked to those of the characters, so much so that they should seem indistinguishable. The Father’s utterance gives the impression that the author is obligated to cater to the wishes of the characters. This problematises the idea of authorship and the autonomy of the author as the author is presented as a puppet to the wishes of the characters.

The Question of Free-Will

Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* repeatedly emphasises on the independence and autonomy of characters in the polyphonic novel – the polyphonic novel is characterised by a type of



hero “whose voice is constructed exactly like the voice of the author himself.... It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work” (7). While the freedom Bakhtin writes about is the ideological or discursive freedom, one may extend the meaning to include the freedom to act as thoughts and the actions they lead to are inextricably related. The characters in a polyphonic text, as mentioned previously, are the Gods of their universe—not in possession of a puppet-like consciousness mouthing the words of their puppeteer, but have autonomy over both their thoughts and actions even though the plot is predetermined by the author. According to the Newtonian mechanical universe theory, it is possible for the creator to sketch out the plot of the lives of his created beings, and any semblance of choice or free-will is only a fallacy. Therefore, following Bakhtin’s definition of a polyphonic novel one may conclude that the universe of a polyphonic text is non-deterministic, allowing the characters to be in possession of agency, and autonomy over their consciousness and consequently, actions.

The characters in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* were not considered worthy enough, by their author, to be scripted, and the play is a record of their quest to undo that. The tussle of will begins with the script as they are resistant to the finalising verdict of the author. They begin by tempting the author with their scenes till he writes the script—“We spent such a long time, such a very long time, believe me, urging our author, persuading him, for me, then her (*Pointing to the Stepdaughter*), then this poor Mother.... Ah, what scenes, what scenes we suggested to him!” (Pirandello *Six* 65). The author’s refusal to comply ends with his blatant dismissal and they look for a replacement instead, claiming that they are the one who possess and control the story and not their author—“The play is in us; we are the play” (Pirandello *Six* 15).

The characters, thus, refuse to submit to the authority of the author and insist on their independence much like the characters of a polyphonic text— “When a character is born he immediately assumes such an independence even of his own author that everyone can imagine him in scores of situations that his author hadn’t even thought of putting him in, and he sometimes acquires a meaning that his author never dreamt of giving” (Pirandello *Six* 65). This autonomy not only allows them to go beyond their designated roles and to explore their destiny, but also encourages them to seek a new author. Their autonomy, however, comes at a cost since every character has assumed an identity autonomous to the author as their independent wills clash against each other. For instance, the Stepdaughter insists, “I want to show you my drama! Mine!” (Pirandello *Six* 55). Every character wants to stage their version of the play and to clarify their stance. As a result, even if they are independent of the author their voices are restrained by the presence of those of the others and their reality is moulded by the reality of the other characters. Independence of the characters, thus, comes at the cost of restraint and limitations. As the Producer explains to an agitated Stepdaughter:

But it’s [the story] not only yours, you know. It’s drama for the other people as well! For him (*Pointing to the Father*) and for your mother! You can’t have one character coming on like you’re doing trampling over the others, taking over the play. Everything needs to be balanced and in harmony so that we can show what has to be shown! (Pirandello *Six* 56)



The aforementioned balance and harmony are necessary because if the domination of the author gives way to the domination of one of the characters where the consciousness of only the said character is given precedence, the polyvocal and by extension the dialogical framework of the text falls apart.

Free-Will: Fallacy or Reality?

As mentioned previously, the author's refusal to flatten, and then absorb the "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness" of the characters, in order to transform them into inanimate puppets played and voiced by a single consciousness, creates a text which is "as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousness, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (Bakhtin *Problems* 6, 18). Since the consciousness of the characters is not absorbed by that of the author's, and they are allowed to retain their subjective perspective, their actions, according to Bakhtin, are autonomous. But this autonomy and subjectivity are dubious; they are not natural, or claimed and obtained by the characters but bestowed upon them by the author who structures the text "to make dialogical opposition inescapable" (Bakhtin *Problems* 18). A polyphonic text springs out of the author's "stubborn urge to see everything coexisting, to perceive and shove all things side by side" (Bakhtin *Problems* 28). As a result, every character becomes a manifestation of differing ideas, and is forced to act and interact accordingly, in order to satiate this "stubborn urge" (Bakhtin *Problems* 28) to witness the coexistence and cohabitation of antithetical entities. Just like the God-like author of the monologic novel, who dictates how a text should be interpreted by dictating the behaviour of each and every character in order to restrict the meaning of the text; the author of a polyphonic text too does the same in order to ensure the polyvocality of the text rendering the free-will of the characters questionable.

In the play Pirandello's characters are not only free to have differing opinions; they are also free to contest each other. In fact, throughout the play the characters continue to contest each others' perception of certain events leaving the spectator confounded at the multiplicity of their truths. However, their actions somehow seem to be tied to a fixed story. They seem to be tied to a plot despite having no script. For instance, the Mother is craving to connect with the Son but she cannot even utter a single word to him since the author had not intended to allow her to experience the satisfaction of opening her heart out, to let her emotions gush out to fill the chasm between the two, and reconnect the Mother-Son duo (Pirandello *Six* 71-72). Even a self-proclaimed dramatically underdeveloped character (Pirandello *Six* 31) like the Son who insists on leaving the scene is unable to leave. Furthermore, the characters in spite of having a name are tied to the identity given to them by the author and are incapable of becoming anything beyond that. As the Father while elucidating the backstory of the Mother (named Amalia) states, "She's not a woman, she's a mother. And her drama...her drama is focused completely on these four children of the two men she had" (Pirandello *Six* 18).



Authorial Determinism and Causality

The incapability of the characters to escape their dramatic fate brings forth the idea of determinism in the lives of the characters. The author of a polyphonic text, as it has already been established before, dictates the behaviour of his characters. However, Bakhtin insists that in a polyphonic novel:

[The] characters remember nothing, they have no biography...there is no causality...no genesis, no explanations based on the past, on the influences of the environment or of the upbringing, and so forth. Every act a character commits...is not predetermined; it is conceived of and represented by the author as free. (*Problems* 29)

The erasure of the characters' histories ensures that their actions have no origin in the context of their past, thereby preventing them from being predetermined by the things associated with the characters. Even though the actions stem forth from a blank slate, i.e. they are spontaneous, and therefore free from the fetters of predetermination, they are ironically "conceived of and represented by the author as free" (Bakhtin *Problems* 29). When free-will becomes a fabrication, someone's conception, the freedom inherent in the free-will becomes questionable. Therefore, the author by depriving the characters of a deterministic past is ironically making them the slaves of his authorial determinism. For instance, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Son refuses to comment upon the on-going action – "I can't and I won't say what I feel, and what I think.... I am a character who has not been fully developed dramatically" (Pirandello *Six* 31). While there is an active denial on his part to act in the re-enactment of their lives' stories, there is also a conscious awareness of incapability because of being a dramatically under-developed character. At one point he even decides to leave the stage, but no matter how much he hovers near the edge of the stage he cannot leave it. As the Step-Daughter mockingly remarks – "He can't, you see? He can't! He's got to stay here! He must. He's chained to us forever" (Pirandello *Six* 69). Thus, authorial design is overarching and all-encompassing, and traps the characters in a pre-destined universe. To further illustrate, when Madame Pace surfaces out of thin air, her spontaneous manifestation appears to be beyond the control of the author. However, upon closer examination her existence is revealed to be dependent upon the demands of the story as imagined by the author; and even though the story has long been abandoned by the author, her existence is still tied to the story – she springs to life when the story demands, and disappears once her function is complete.

Causality and Dialogy

In a polyphonic text a lot is dependent upon the interaction between the characters, both verbal and physical, as explained previously. Just like an utterance acquires meaning only in relation to other utterances (Dentith *Bakhtinian* 43-44), similarly in order for an action to acquire meaning it must be assessed in relation to actions preceding and succeeding it – every action must anticipate the action of the other, and simultaneously be a reaction to an antecedent action. For a text to be polyphonic the words of the characters must be highly dialogised, so that the priority is not given to one particular voice, idea or attitude. In order to accomplish that their words are "shot through with



anticipations of, and rejoinder to, the word of an other” (Dentith *Bakhtinian* 44). Furthermore, if “*The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through*” (40) as Bakhtin claims in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, then a dialogic relation must be present between the actions of the characters as well; thereby establishing a chain of causality, and by extension, determinism. In *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, the Father decides that the Mother should live with his Secretary, for it will make her happier, which leads to a series of uncontrollable events ending with the deaths of the Boy and the Girl; and this act on behalf of the Father moulds the rest of the story.

A dialogue is constitutive of three elements according to Michael Holquist, “an utterance, a reply and a relation between the two” (36). This conjecture leads one to question the nature of the relation – if a reply is a response to an utterance, the reply being an antecedent utterance to another reply, and the utterance being a successive reply to another utterance, then it may be assumed that the relation between the two implies causality, i.e., the utterance causes the reply to be uttered. According to causality theory, the universe is swirling in an illimitable play of causation. Since “the causation of one thing by another is nothing but one thing making the other intelligible” (2) to quote Michael Della Rocca; the actions of characters in a text must also follow the string of causality so as to make the story intelligible. However, in this endless play of actions there must be a primary action which initiates the play, in other words, a first domino which causes the rest to fall. This first action is the author’s conception of the story followed by the *naissance* of the characters, and the moment a character is conceived it gets trapped in the whirlpool of causality. As Freddie Montgomery, the narrator of John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence*, explains: “I used to believe, like everyone else, that I was determining the course my own life, according to my own decisions, but gradually as I accumulated more and more past to look back on, I realised that I had done the things I did because I could do no other...my life [is] a prison in which all actions are determined according to a random pattern thrown down by an unknown and insensate authority” (15-16). The author, being what Thomas Aquinas refers to as the “first cause who is not causally dependent” (Davies Introduction 9), becomes akin to Freddie’s “unknown and insensate authority” (Banville *Evidence* 16). The author pulls the narrative strings, while the characters much like Pirandello’s actors fail to realise that “you are playing a game where you have been given parts and in which you are not just yourself but the puppets of yourself” (Pirandello *Six* 9). They are, to borrow Pirandello’s metaphor, egg shells bereft of any agency (Pirandello *Six* 9) dancing along to the tunes of the author. To elucidate, in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* the characters were born from a plot and into a plot, and despite their attempts at changing their destiny the denouement of their story remains unchanged. They are much like Munch’s screaming man, locked in a frame, condemned to scream forever without respite. As the Father almost cries out, “Ours [reality] doesn’t change, it can’t change, it can never be different, never because it is already determined, like this, for ever, that’s what’s so terrible!” (Pirandello *Six* 64). Interestingly enough, the characters are free enough to look for a new author but not free enough to change their destiny even after they have been abandoned by their author. As a result, their endeavour to gain autonomy over their plot fails repeatedly.



Free-Will and Determinism: Endless Dialogue

The polyphonic text is, therefore, characterised by an endless dialogue where the “internal open-endedness of the characters” is juxtaposed against the “external completedness” of the text (Bakhtin *Problems* 39). This brings us to Bakhtin’s idea of “relative freedom” (*Problems* 13) of the characters in a polyphonic novel, the cornerstone which makes a text quintessentially dialogic. The universe of a polyphonic text, thus, despite its seemingly innate determinism provides the characters with a space to contest the authority of the author which launches an endless dialogue between the characters’ free-will and authorial determinism. This dialogue is dramatised in “A Character in Distress,” where the narrator-author reads a novel where:

...the author – completely absorbed in holding together one of the tritest stories – had found himself unable to understand this character, who in himself contained the germ of a real creation. But for a time the character had succeeded in escaping from the author, in cutting himself loose and superimposing himself vigorously upon the banal story of the book. Then all of a sudden, deformed and enfeebled, he had allowed himself to be bent to the exigencies of a wrong and silly ending. (Pirandello 13)

Similarly, in Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* even when the characters fail to change their predetermined fate, their efforts are not entirely futile. In the end the Father, the Mother and the Son come together and stand “transfixed” (Pirandello *Six* 76), with the solace of having the chance to contest the autonomy of the author by narrating their story to the Producer and the actors, and almost staging it, despite being doomed to wander without a script. Every time they try to change their story, they will be forced to line up and react according to the whimsy of their author. At the same time, the longer the characters are tied to the predetermined story of the author, they will never cease to resist the authority of the author. As a result, as long as the characters are denied uncontested autonomy, they can prevent the author from assuming the role of the uncontested authority over the text. Their relative freedom, thus, lies not in their autonomy but in their struggle for autonomy.

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