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Support Materials: Complicated Texts

Skills: Complicated Texts

Simple questions like ‘what is an author?’ and ‘what is a text?’ become fiendishly difficult once you begin to think about them. This worksheet is designed to help complicate your understanding of authorship and textuality: what exactly is the object of your studies and how does a text come to be in your hands, on a screen, on a stage, or in some other manner present in the world? Is this the work of one or many pairs of hands? Just who is involved (and has a stake in) the production and consumption of texts? And what is the difference between reading and criticism? Lying behind these questions are thorny issues: power, prestige, authority, control and money.



Reading activity: ‘The Death of the Author’

In 1967 an English translation of Roland Barthes’s essay, ‘The Death of the Author’, was published in America; the French original, ‘Le mort de l’auteur’, was slower through the press and appeared in France in 1968 – a famous year of strikes and protests.

Barthes’s essay offered a provocative new conception of reading suited to the revolutionary spirit of the age. He is concerned with authorship and how modern, consumerist society turns authors into god-like figures. For Barthes, these gods – their lives and intentions – were myths of power: authors had been transformed into the site and source of all meaning in texts.

Barthes objected to this anti-democratic Author-God; he was also suspicious of institutions that depended on such a conception of authorship. Lurking behind the Author-God, then, are the critics: the representatives of a literary establishment who claimed to access and understand authors’ meanings. These critics reserved for themselves the power to explain texts, and for Barthes, this form of literary criticism closed down other potential readings (and excluded other potential readers).

Barthes wanted to ‘kill’ the Author-God in favour of a new, more democratic understanding of authorship: the modern scriptor. Scriptors assemble texts, and the texts they assemble are understood to be messy and complex: words carry meanings with them, and no one – not even the author – can control how texts are made meaningful by their readers.

Take some time to read the following quotations from Barthes's 'The Death of the Author'. The language is playful, lyrical and complex; it can seem overwhelming at first. But take your time, read it slowly, then read it again. After this, there are some questions, below, for you to consider:

The author still rules in manuals of literary history, in biographies of writers, in magazine interviews, and even in the awareness of literary men, anxious to unite, by their private journals, their person and their work; the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; criticism still consists, most of the time, in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of the man Baudelaire, Van Gogh's work his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice: the explanation of the work is always sought in the man who has produced it, as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of fiction, it was always finally the voice of one and the same person, the author, which delivered his "confidence."

[...]

The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book: the book and the author take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a before and an after: the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child. Quite the contrary, the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now.

[...]

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, not one of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.

[...]

Once the Author is gone, the claim to “decipher” a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing. This conception perfectly suits criticism, which can then take as its major task the discovery of the Author (or his hypostases: society, history, the psyche, freedom) beneath the work: once the Author is discovered, the text is “explained:” the critic has conquered; hence it is scarcely surprising not only that, historically, the reign of the Author should also have been that of the Critic, but that criticism (even “new criticism”) should be overthrown along with the Author. In a multiple writing, indeed, everything is to be distinguished, but nothing deciphered; structure can be followed, “threaded” (like a stocking that has run) in all its recurrences and all its stages, but there is no underlying ground; the space of the writing is to be traversed, not penetrated: writing ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption of meaning. Thus literature (it would be better, henceforth, to say writing), by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a “secret:” that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law.

[...]

[W]e know that to restore to writing its future, we must reverse its myth: the birth of the reader must be ransomed by the death of the Author.

Read the complete text of ‘The Death of the Author’
here: <https://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Barthes.pdf>

Are we, as twenty-first-century readers and consumers of art, still “tyrannically centered” on the lives and personalities of authors and artists? How is this evident in our society, and what are the consequences (good and/or bad)?

What do you make of Barthes’s idea that writing can only ever be re-arranged and re-created? What impact does this have on ideas of originality and genius? Why might Barthes want to ‘kill’ these concepts along with the Author-God?

What do you make of Barthes's conception of reading as "distinguishing" and following structures, as "traversing" rather than "penetrating" texts? What is at stake in these metaphors? How do they present the activity of readers?

Can you identify the revolutionary spirit of 1968 in these ideas?

General questions

Look through your bookshelves and consider how your reading and engagement with texts is shaped by 1] the material object; 2] accompanying words and images; and 3] the labour of people other than the author. You might wish to consider:

1. Book covers.
2. Hardback vs. paperback vs. ebook.
3. Prefaces, forewords and introductions.
4. Blurbs and adverts.
5. Author photographs.
6. Footnotes, endnotes and afterwords.
7. Paper quality and colour.
8. Typeface.
9. Publishers, editors, translators.

How do these things shape your encounter with the text and make it present in the world?

What is the different between the 'text' itself and the material object, the book, that you hold in your hand? Or, to look to the theatre, what is the difference between the script and the performance?

Does thinking about the material object, and the different people who labour to produce it, change the way you think about authorship (and how/if authors control the meaning of their work)?

Suggested further reading

This newspaper article provides a useful overview of the intellectual and political contexts in which 'The Death of Author' was published:

Andrew Gallix, 'In theory: The Death of the Author', *The Guardian*, 13 January 2010: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/jan/13/death-of-the-author>

The following novels and films engage creatively with ideas of authorship, authority and the artifice of their medium:

Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1761-67) [And the film, *A Cock and Bull Story*, dir. by Michael Winterbottom, 2006.]

Hannah Crafts, *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (c.1855-69; first published 2002) [Novel in the first-person, possibly the first known example by an African-American woman, in dialogue with slave narratives, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*.]

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) [And the film dir. by Sally Potter, 1992.]

Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) [Novella in dialogue with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.]

John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) [And the film dir. by Karel Reisz, 1981.]

William Goldman, *The Princess Bride* (1973) [And the film dir. by Rob Reiner, 1987]

Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979)

Audre Lorde, *Zami* (1982); *Sister Outsider* (1984)

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

Martin Amis, *London Fields* (1989)

Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (1992)

Paul Beatty, *White Boy Shuffle* (1996)

The films of Pedro Almodóvar, especially: *All About My Mother* (1999);
Pain and Glory (2019)

Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2000)

Bernadine Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* (2001)

Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (2001) [And the film dir. by Joe Wright, 2007]

The films of Spike Jonze, especially: *Being John Malkovich* (1999);
Adaptation (2002)

The graphic novels of Alison Bechdel: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*
(2006); *Are You My Mother?* (2012)

Kiese Laymon, *Long Division* (2013)

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014)

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015)

Deadpool (dir. by Tim Miller, 2016)

Maggie Nelson, *Ongoingness: The End of a Diary* (2018)

Jenn Ashworth, *Notes Made While Falling* (2020)