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The Text as an Orphan

In his 1967 essay "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes announces the text as an orphan. No more is the text protected and secured by the power and authority of its father, the author.

Barthes suggests in his essay that it is quite hard to determine whose words are being said in a text. Some may say that the said words are those of the characters because characters flow spontaneously in literary works; whereas others may tend to claim that these are the words of the hegemonic author being forced to the mouth of the character. Other readers may have other interpretations and theories to explain the ownership of the said words. Therefore, and since it is hard to guess, Barthes believes that once the text is written, its author is 'dead;' and that it is only the reader who can make a final decision. This, subsequently, leaves the text independent from the domination of its writer.

The author, in consequence, is not minor; he is absent and silenced to the advantage of his work. The reader, on the other hand, is not bound to the socio-economic background of the writer, showing a new pattern of creativity.

For a long time in history, readers of literature have been passive in the creative process. Contrariwise, with the absence of the author, the reader is able to study, analyze, interpret, and revisit the work the way s/he likes. For this reason, every reader is a critic who applies his/her own vision and personal touch to the work.

No more would authors interfere in our readings or understandings of those little orphans; the texts. We, the readers, adopt texts as their foster parents and mold them in accordance with the multiplicity of our backgrounds by putting them within the framework of our experiences and backgrounds. This process enriches the text so that instead of having one imposed implication, it holds a broad range of layers of meanings.

At a later stage comes Jacques Derrida who privileges writing over speech, against the previously taken-for-granted Western traditions. Derrida thinks of speech as rigid because it has to follow the rules of its father, the speaker; whereas the written word is an orphan that can be 'manipulated,' since its father is already dead. In the author/reader binary opposition, it is now time that the reader seizes his/her chance to take the upper hand.

Quite simply, Derrida turns the text into a lady of the evening with which everybody is able to 'play.' Again readers and scholars are enjoying the endless mental climaxes because no reading follows a certain pattern.

The postmodern reader is not a slave of the hegemony of the author. This reader represents the new authority now, for he enslaves the text to his own dogma. Take the example of *Waiting for Godot* in which the two tramps Vladimir and Estragon can represent the suppression of women for a feminist reader, the subordination of the working class for a Marxist one, the dehumanization for black people for an anti-racist scholar, and the oppression of the colonized people practiced by the colonizer for a

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post-colonial. Samuel Beckett, on the other hand, might have had a completely different interpretation of his play that would suggest other meanings, but who cares about what Beckett was thinking? The play is ours now and we can look at it the way we want. We do not have to dig deep into the life of Beckett or bother ourselves to understand Beckett's personal experience that caused him to write this play in order to guess what he wanted to say.

According to this understanding, authors do not write one text. They, actually, open up their work to endless rewritings and rereadings. Did Shakespeare, for instance, imagine that years after writing his plays, someone would revisit them in the light of Marxism or Feminism? Not at all!

Thanks to Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida: we are all critics and our own experiences do matter.