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The Tell Tale Word: The Role of Authorship in Literary Analysis

Drunkard. Drug addict. Depressed. Dark. Disturbed. What do all of these words have in common? They are all words that feed the enigma of poet and author Edgar Allan Poe. These words influence readers to love Poe or hate him; to be fascinated or repulsed by him; to be drawn to him or to dismiss him as nothing more than the gloom and doom those words represent. Poe is an author whose infamous character at times overshadows the notoriety of his works, and as such his works are often viewed in the context of his mythology and the bias that creates. This begs the question: Should Poe's character be a factor in evaluating his works? As with many things, it is important to find a balance. It is essential that any evaluation of Poe's works includes both an analysis from the perspective of the author and an analysis of the works as a separate entity.

In considering the role of authorship in literary analysis, it is important to first determine the goal of analysis. Any analysis of literature should result in the discovery of meaning, or (ideally) in multiple meanings. An audience should read literature through different lenses and incorporate all of those perspectives in deriving truth. Keeping this goal in mind, the question is formed: Does the author help or hinder the reader in finding truths? Does considering an author allow readers to look at a text beyond that of its author-intended meaning, or does it limit the ability of readers to make unique interpretations?

In his essay "The Death of the Author," twentieth century French critic Roland Barthes argues that the author is an impediment in deriving meaning. Barthes claims that

a text has no meaning until read; but once read, a text develops an infinite number of truths. He continues further, arguing that it is the responsibility of the reader to discover all of the possibilities that lie within a text, and that only freed from the knowledge of the author's background, it is possible to do so.

In the American poet Richard Wilbur's literary analysis "The House of Poe," he takes the opposite outlook on authorship in his evaluation of Poe's writings. In his analysis, Wilbur asserts that Poe's works all act as greater allegories for the state of the poet in an increasingly rationalist world. Wilbur bases the entirety of his claim in his knowledge of the author Poe, and by doing so counters Barthes idea of the author's role in the text to reader relationship.

While these two claims are essentially in complete opposition to each other, both Barthes and Wilbur draw from the relationship between an author and God. Barthes, as an opponent of the author in literary analysis, obviously uses the author-God analogy as an example of, in his opinion, an outdated model of literary analysis: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (224). Barthes views looking at the author as "God" as limiting. From his perspective, when you look at the author as an omniscient power, there can be one and only one truth, and therefore kill the potential for alternative truths.

Wilbur again takes the opposite approach. He uses Poe's own belief in the god-author relationship to further advance his thesis: "Poe conceived of God as a poet... Not to worship beauty, not to regard poetic knowledge as divine, would be to turn one's back on God and fall from Grace" (811). Wilbur asserts that Poe considered the Creator

of the Universe to be like a poet of nature, and as a poet it was his great privilege to emulate God through art. Poe considers the author-God analogy to be not only part of literature, but a mandatory part.

Because both Barthes and Wilbur analyze the author-God analogy in their opposing arguments, it is safe to assume that this is a significant piece of the puzzle in examining the role of authorship in literary analysis. I would further argue, however, that both critics are evaluating this analogy in the wrong terms, thus leaving weaknesses in their claims to the role of authorship.

Barthes would say that the author is not “God” and that considering him as such limits the work to but one meaning - that intended meaning of the author-god. In doing so, Barthes fails to examine the God to which he draws his analogy. Look, for example, at any of the major monotheistic writings: the Bible, the Torah, the Qur’an, etc. In the whole of history, are there any writings with more interpretations to their name? If the Word of God, the supposed reigning, divine God of the Universe, is intended to have a “single ‘theological’ meaning” then I would contend that God is a literary failure. Even He could not prevent His audience from making their own, varying interpretations of His words. Or perhaps He chose to give humans the free will to interpret as they wished. Either way, it is presumably human nature. The Word of God has been interpreted into more truths than any other text. In other words, portraying the author as God of his work does not limit his work to one possible meaning as Barthes claims. Rather, it encourages humans to discover multiple meanings within any given text even if it runs counter to the author-god’s intentions. It is when humans ignore the possibility of multiple meanings and hold their own interpretation as the sole Truth that unnecessary conflict occurs. The

important message to be taken from this is, to use a cliché: “Life is a journey and not a destination.” In terms of literary analysis this means that the most important aspect of analyzing is that the reader is actively seeking and in pursuit of all meaning. The discovery of a singular Truth is much less important, as it will always remain debatable.

Claiming that the author is not God of his work disregards the importance of trying to understand the author and to gain a meaning. Barthes, for all his talk of infinite truths, somehow manages to exclude from his argument how a reader is supposed to derive *all* possible truths without including the author’s truth, and thus the author’s background as part of that infinite number. If the goal is to extract as many truths as possible from a text, it does not make sense to simply ignore the viewpoint of the author.

Now, just because one takes into account the author in no way ensures that one will discover the intended meaning. Just as there is no way for any one religion to prove that their interpretation of the Word is the absolute and only intended truth of God, there is no way to prove that any one interpretation of a literary text is the intended meaning of the author. For instance, using his background knowledge of the author, Wilbur claims that Poe’s works are all allegorical for the dream world of the poet and the invasion of the rational world into that sphere. Using the same background knowledge of Poe, I interpret the same works differently. For the most part, I agree that Poe’s works are allegorical, but allegorical in the sense that they reflect a sensationalized and imaginative version of the events in Poe’s own life. If you look at Poe’s biography, the events in his life directly correlate time wise to the publishing dates of his stories and poems with reflective story lines.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is an excellent example of this. Published in

1845, the plotline parallels the trials of Poe's life in the same year. Poe is infamous for marrying his young cousin, aligning in the story to the hinted incest between twins Roderick and Madeline Usher. Both Madeline Usher and Poe's cousin and wife, Virginia Poe, suffer from long term illnesses. When Virginia's situation became critical, Poe experienced "severe nervous depression." Madeline falls into a coma, and subsequently Roderick becomes extremely depressed and disturbed. His deteriorating mental health state extends beyond Poe's depression to such a point that he buries Madeline alive.

From here, meaning is open for interpretation. Perhaps Poe is expressing a desire to end his wife's, and therefore his own, suffering. Poe could be voicing his fear that his line will end with the death of his wife and his "house" will fall. Or maybe Poe simply created the story as an extreme dramatization of his own situation in order to make his life seem easier in the light of comparison. The point is that by entering into conversation "with the author" numerous potential truths are unearthed.

Some may question whether entering into a conversation with an author based on their biography is valid. After all, Poe is a perfect example of the misrepresented author. Following his death, Poe's greatest enemy Rufus Wilmot Griswold penned both his obituary and subsequent biographies. While many of Poe's friends were quick to oppose Griswold's slander, the myth of Poe stuck and created an ethos that, while unsupported by Poe's actual life, is arguably a huge factor in Poe's posthumous popularity. People are fascinated by this notion of the moody and gloomy Poe as author of such dark and twisted stories, and for many this is the bias with which they enter into the text. Even taking into account Poe's reformed, "historian-approved" biography, is it a valid base for literary analysis?

We are left with the idea of entering into a conversation with the text itself.

Without directly talking to the author in person (which is impossible in Poe's case), there is no absolute way to derive one "right" meaning from a text. I would argue that this proves that the "one and only" truth does not exist. This is a freeing concept. As readers we are held to the responsibility of examining a text in as many ways and with as many resources as possible, but without the existence of one singular truth, the meanings we do discover can *all* exist as truths.

Having now critically examined both Barthes and Wilbur's claims in regards to authorship and specifically in relation to Poe, I would propose a model of reading and a consideration of authorship that falls between those two claims. Readers cannot simply discount the author in their pursuit of meaning. Would a judge make a ruling without being fully equipped with all the evidence possible? Yet, the author's intended truth is only one of infinite possibilities. It is time for readers to be viewed as a fully competent audience capable of evaluating all information and stepping out of whatever bias they may possess. As Barthes writes, it is time for the "birth of the reader," but this does not have to be at the expense of the author. Yes, readers should assume full power and responsibility as truth *seekers*, but at the same time should not take their relationship with the author for granted. The most productive model of reading then is not the "death of the author"; it is rather the rise of the reader.

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