

# The Death of the Author

Robert Eaglestone explains why it is no good looking to the author for help in interpreting a text.

You've often had this experience: you see a movie, read a book or a poem, and you are not sure what it means, not sure your ideas are right. When you talk to somebody else about it they disagree with your ideas about what it means. This sort of uncertainty and disagreement about what things mean is central to studying English or Media. But what happens when you disagree? How do you sort out your uncertainty? Often, rather than coming up with your own informed opinion, you turn to an authority to give you an answer. And the authority that you or your teacher turns to is often the author. After all, it's the same word, more or less: author, authority. You ask: 'But what did she (or he) mean?' and hope that you'll get a final answer that will end your disagreement, or answer your questions. But you won't because - as the slogan has it - the author is dead.

## The author is dead

What does this slogan mean? It doesn't just mean that Shakespeare is pushing up daisies. It means that it's no good turning to these people for an answer to your question about their text. Why not?

As usual with these sorts of 'theoretical' questions, the answer lies in what you are doing in the first place when you read a novel or poem, or watch a film. Often - and especially at A and AS Level - it seems as if these texts are codes in which authors have 'disguised' themes and metaphors, and your job as a student is to 'decode' this message. But this isn't the case. After all, if a writer had wanted simply to give you a message, then, paradoxically, literature wouldn't need to exist. Why write a novel to say 'war is evil' when you could just say it, or go on a demonstration, or form a political party or lobby - or even become - your representative in government? And even in the most polemical and argumentative of literary texts, you'll find things that are not parts of the argument, or even run against it. Reading is not decoding: it would be no more than a crossword puzzle if it was.

Sometimes, too, it seems as if you are supposed to be telepathic. Using the poems as a clue, you are supposed to read the mind of the writer, who is usually long gone anyway. Even characters in Star Trek can't read the mind of the long dead.

## Reading is interpretation

So: reading is not code breaking or telepathy. Instead, reading is a process of actively interpreting a text. Working out what it means to you involves making an 'informed judgement' which takes into account what you know about the text, its context and how you, the reader, have interpreted it. What did you look for when you read it? What do you think is important in this text? In any text? But this reading process starts with the words on the page.

During my A Levels, I was always troubled by questions like 'In Paradise Lost, does Milton convince you that Satan is both attractive and corrupt?' as it conjured up the rather worrying image of Milton

appearing to me during the exam and arguing passionately that *Paradise Lost* shows Satan as, well, both attractive and corrupt. But, thinking about it, surely, it is the text of *Paradise Lost* and how you read it that would convince you (or not) rather than Milton himself. A text does not magically bring the author into the room with you: writing is just marks on paper. More than that, the very presence of the writing shows up the absence of the author. If the author were actually there, he or she could simply talk to you: the written text itself implies their absence, like an empty chair at a celebratory meal.

## Biographical 'evidence'

Add to this the fact that no 'biographical evidence' about what the author meant can ever be certain because whatever the author said is itself another text open to interpretation. A letter, saying, 'my novel means ...' is not firm evidence. Not only could it be a lie, plain and simple, but it is also open to interpretation because it is written within a certain historical period, where certain ideas were dominant, and because we, perhaps centuries later, may know things that the author didn't (and vice versa). Authors might have very astute things to say about their own work, but what they say is only as valid as what a reader might say in determining the meaning of a text. In interpreting their work, an author is doing the same job as anybody else looking at a text.

Another way of thinking about this is to ask, 'Who owns words?' Two critics, Wimsatt and Beardsley, in a famous essay called 'The Intentional Fallacy' argue that a text 'is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it'. They argue that authors might shape language, but ultimately it is public property, and readers may make of it what they will. This is not a modern idea: at the end of his long poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400) wrote 'go little book, go'. He knew that, once created, the poem was out of his hands, and people were free to interpret it any way they wished.

If an author's comments about intention are not authoritative, biographies are even less useful. A biography is, after all, only an interpretation of somebody's life. It will certainly inform the reader about the author and her or his period, but will not provide a 'correct interpretation' for a literary text.

## 'Interpretation' challenges 'authority'

All this returns to the idea of 'authority'. Making your own interpretation and informed judgement can often be a challenge to authority simply because it's your own judgement. That's why people will often try to return to 'what the author meant' - although nobody can really know - to overrule how you interpret the text. As I suggested, 'what the author meant' seems to rely on a belief that literature is simply a code, or that readers are telepathic, or that printed words or celluloid can magically make an author present. (Interestingly, these ideas are not new: a philosopher, Jacques Derrida, discusses an ancient Egyptian myth about the origin of writing, retold by the Greek philosopher Plato 2400 years ago, in which all the same ideas occurred.) Reading is not magic, or decoding or telepathy: it is active interpretation.

And the fact that you have to interpret the text means that you, not the author, are the authority. There are right answers: yours.

## Further reading

Useful essays on this subject are by Roland Barthes in 'Death of the Author' (equally interesting and perhaps even more useful is his essay 'From Work to Text'); Michel Foucault 'What is an Author?' and W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley 'The Intentional Fallacy'. All these, and a great deal more relevant material, are included in an excellent reader edited by Seán Burke called *Authorship from Plato to the*

Postmodern (Edinburgh University Press, 1995). Seán Burke has also written a very good study of this issue which is critical of the 'death of the author' idea: Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

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