

**The Function of Subject as Signified**  
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Barthes' argument in *The Death of the Author*, as it is clarified by the structuralist approach of Ferdinand de Saussure and the manifestations of his linguistic system adapted by Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, is composed of an ultimate dismissal of the signification of a text in favor of the ratification of the function of the subject. Once this function is ascertained, Barthes shifts his impetus to the antiquation of the author's place in general. The function of the subject that Barthes concludes is the concatenation of the signifier of a text for the purpose of the unification of its constitution.

The application of Ferdinand de Saussure's theories to Barthes' notion and in general to literary critique, as evident from his study in the realm of semiotics in his *Course in General Linguistics*, is related to the complexity of the sign within the bounds of the arbitrary nature between signifier and signified. The meaning of an arbitrary relation between signifier and signified is concretely discursive. External of Saussure's semiotic commitment, this study influenced the writings of Lacan and Derrida, who conscribe to this principle of capricious relativity in their discourses. (Ungar xii)

Within the scope of Saussurean theory, a viewpoint can be ascertained that is conceptualized for applicability to *The Death of the Author*. Saussure begins his introduction to this topic by defining

language in a way that concurs with Barthes' use of it. Language, as the "social side of speech, outside the individual who can never create or modify it by himself." This is concomitant with Barthes' work, particularly in his concept of the author as the subject of a text. Barthes stresses the impersonality of any work, due to the essence of language, that it is the quintessence of the performance and not the author's subjectivity. In one of his most poignant assignments of profound semiological characterization, Saussure posits the nature of the linguistic sign as the unity of a concept and a sound-image. For this assumption to be relevant, it follows that language must be principally a naming process, which would necessitate the assumption that the entire world of ideas is already in existence, has already been enabled in some Ecclesiastical precondition. The application of this idea to Barthes' work is in the very essence of the idea of the death of the author, the rejection of the assumption that the ideas that we commit to a certain name are the product of solely their own conjecture and its manifestations. Saussurean logic continues on this theme to the extent that the arbitrary nature of the sign is indicative of the situation of an individual that operates within the linguistic system, and their helplessness and passivity in relation to the signs that compose their writing. For instance, a writer in this sense would be likened to a

submissive and powerless speck being tossed about by the constant and indiscriminate waves (arbitrary signs) of language, and this is what Barthes intends. (Saussure 960-965)

In a deeper analysis of Barthes using Saussurean theory, the recognition of the sign as a whole, the analysis of the relation between signs, and the possibility of facts exterior to the system of language can be considered. Saussure's argument begins to suggest that meaning does not even belong to words, but to the field of meaning in which the word occurs, and in its differences from other words.

“Everything that has been said up to this point boils down to this in language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system.”  
(Saussure 972)

For the purposes of Barthes' work, the utility of language that is most important is the idea that meaning is created through difference, not through identity. The effect is to determine the use of language within the context of semiotics, in which language is an independent system governed by the paradigmatic aspect of associativity. That is to say, in the great circuitous nature of semantics, each singular idea can only delimitate itself as distinct from the entirety of other ideas. It follows from this that Barthes concept of the author is fundamentally extricated from the process of instilling meaning into their works. Accordingly, Saussure also theorizes that the freedom of combination in the process of syntax belongs entirely to the speaker or writer or author figure, but to language itself as well. The problem for him comes in the inability to determine the proportions of linguistic fact and individual freedom with which the writing has been created. This determination is in conflict with Barthes' conditions of the author, and problematizes his view of the subject in the creation of a work. (Saussure 972-977)

An attempt at understanding Barthes through the theories of Jacques Lacan produces similar conditions of comparison for the analysis of *The Death of the Author*. In *The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious*, Lacan begins by noting the process of psychoanalysis and the revelation through its use on the unconscious of the instinctual

awareness of the entire structure of language. By the title he is indicating the possibility of the operative function of the formative aspects of language that reside in the unconscious. It follows then, that all of language, including its basic constitution, is present before the subject becomes aware of it. By virtue of writing, the subject is performing his basic role as one who is subservient to that system. With the understanding that the unconscious is structured like a language, an analysis of Barthes' work is elucidated. Just as the conscious mind of the subject draws on the codes of language that are necessitated in the unconscious, the author similarly draws on the formative process of using signs that have already been necessitated in language.

“What this structure of the signifying chain discloses is the possibility I have, precisely in so far as I have this language in common with other subjects, that is to say, in so far as it exists as a language, to use it in order to signify *something quite other* than what it says. This function of speech is more worth pointing out than that of ‘disguising the thought’ (more often than not indefinable) of the subject; it is no less than the

function of indicating the place of this subject in  
the search for the true.” (Lacan 1298)

Furthermore, as it is clear that the thoughts did not originate in direct consciousness, it is equally clear that the ideas that are composed of signs did not originate in the mind of the subject of a work, the supposed author. As Lacan suggests, it is more noteworthy that the structure of the process of signification suggests that ulterior meaning be deposited, when itself is no more than a process of renaming.  
(Lacan 1290-1298)

The problems that are encountered by a Lacanian interpretation of *The Death of the Author* are mounting. What was normally thought of as an author and his work, is now called into question. All that is definite is that there is a person who physically wrote some specific words, but it is not appropriate to venture to call that person an author, nor is it appropriate to call those words a ‘work.’ In essence, the Lacanian theory posits that the subject is not the one who thinks, but *is* itself spoken and verified through language. Whereas philosopher Rene Descartes would argue that the subject thinks and from thus derives its existence (Cogito ergo sum), the Lacanian subject is its inverse. If the subject exists at all, it is precisely in the realm of thought where it does not think, in the unconscious. In Lacan’s description of the subject, he

sets up the same contradiction that Barthes faces in his work. By talking about the inferiority of the subject from the perspective of thought, isn't Lacan facing a glaring contradiction, condemning his own work? Isn't Barthes facing the same paradox when he authors a thesis on the death of the author? To combat the efficacy of the self-destructive argument, it would have to be proven that these works transcend the theories to which they refer. (Burke 99-103)

In a similar manner to Lacan, Jacques Derrida in his *Of Grammatology* absorbs the theoretical structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure. Derrida's approach, however, focuses on logocentrism, which he refers to as the metaphysics of phonetic writing. In his diegesis, the word is constitutive of reality in itself. Derrida begins by describing the writer as one who is necessarily dominated by the system of laws that is language and logic. They are able to write in the dominion of these systems strictly by being governed by them. Derrida then focuses on the reader's functional assignment, the critical recognition of the relationship of the writer's intention in writing and the inadvertent patterns of language that are used. This ultimate responsibility of the reader is the signification of the text according to Derridean thought. (Derrida 1822-1825)

“If reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above; as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. *There is nothing outside of the text.*” (Derrida 1825)

This facet of Derridean logic is concomitant with Barthes’ work in that the ultimate removal of the author is synchronized with the supreme function of the reader. Derrida goes as far as to say that a specific text of Rousseau can not be described as anything but writing, in that it is simply a series of significations and referents. For Derrida, the very thing that opens the meaningful language is the function of

writing that is the negation of natural presence. The association of this dictum to literary criticism in the framework of Barthes is direct, the subordination of the human subject. The remainder of Derrida's work in *Of Grammatology* is indicative of the infinite regress of language in the process of signification. The signified may be infinitely deferred, as it were.

“Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.” (Barthes 1466)

This sheds light on Barthes' conception of the expression of the subject. Even in the case that the so called 'author' wishes to express himself, he is simply referring to the eternally preconceived dictionary of signifiers, each one pointing to another as if a part of some Byzantine labyrinth, with all paths inherently connected. (Burke 121-123)

Barthes believes that to supply a text with a relation to an author is to provide it with a final signified, to end the chain of signification. This is an adaptation of Derrida's term 'supplement,' which is a replacement of the origin of a text. While the primary origin (the

association of a text with an “author-god” in Barthes’ essay) is lacking, the supplement is composed of the unifying addition that both exposes the lack of the writing and provides it with a final signified. In Barthes’ estimation, furnishing a text with this supplement is beneficial to its explanation and digestion.

“Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’- victory to the critic.” (Barthes 1469)

It is in this explanation that the function of the author and the critic are merged. The critic endows a text with a final signified (the author) for the purpose of deciphering the meaning. This is the never-ending chain of drawing on the linguistic base just so that it can be referred back to in the process of scrutinizing itself. The encouragement of writing for the purpose of dissecting it is the pathology of the critic. Barthes’

solution is the reader. This is reminiscent of Lacan's condemnation of the process of chain of signification in mandating the rotation of meaning in a series of signifiers. (Burke 123-128)

In summation, the discourse provided by Saussure, Lacan, and Derrida is exemplary in assisting Barthes' arguments by providing a series of perspective tools with which to analyze them. The position and function of the subject, especially in relation to the signification of a work, is important in the determination of the utility of language in general:

“...the author enters his own death, writing begins.” (Barthes 1466)

In the kingdom of semiology, it is perhaps the most important.

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