The Author is Dead, Long Live the Fan? A Consideration of the Relationship between Barthes' Announcement of "The Death of the Author" and the Responsibilities Placed on the Reader by 'Reader Response' Theories.

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Abstract

Barthes' announcement of "The Death of the Author" was somewhat premature for the reader has new freedom and power. The advent of Web 2.0 has enabled an explosion of online fan-communities where the role of the reader in relation to the text becomes extremely important, and any interpretation is as valid as the next. For Barthes, and other 'Reader Response' theorists, the responsibilities of the reader are: 1. to reject the image of the Author-God, 2. to be open to multiplicity of meaning and 3. to be an active participant in the text and a creator of meaning, rather than a passive consumer. These implied responsibilities align very well with the practices and attitudes of the aforementioned fan communities, in particular with the readers and writers of fanfiction. Yet, there is often a tension between authors and fans because of the abovementioned approaches. Thus it is clear that authors are influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by the prevailing idea of the Author-god, and the author is still some way from being 'dead.'

Keywords: Barthes; reader response theory; literature

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Essay

"A good reader also creates" – Swiss Proverb (Pugh, 2005: 219-20)

It could seem, on first consideration, that Barthes' announcement of "The Death of the Author" was somewhat premature. In twenty-first century literary culture, to be an author is to be another form of celebrity. Writers have their own websites and newspaper columns, readers queue to attend their book-signings, new publications are heralded as 'The latest book from so-and-so', and the name of the author regularly appears on dust jackets in larger lettering than the title of the work. It would seem that the cult of the author is alive and well.

And yet, while the writer continues to be deified in this way by the media and the publishing industry, much of their god-like power is in fact being lost. In this, the age of Web 2.0, the reader has new freedom and power. Anybody can write a review of a book, and post it on bookselling websites for thousands to see. The barriers between reader and writer have been broken down, and they can communicate as equals via blogs and message boards. More importantly, however, the advent of Web 2.0 has enabled an explosion of online fan-communities, or fandoms, as they are commonly known, where the role of the reader in relation to the text becomes still more important, and any interpretation is as valid as the next.

These aspects of fandom are particularly evident in the phenomenon known as fanfiction, where reader becomes creator, using characters and situations from existing fiction to create their own stories. (Pugh, 2005) In past centuries this method of writing was not considered unusual. As Sheenagh Pugh points out, in the opening chapter of *The Democratic Genre* (2005), medieval and early modern writers regularly plundered other works for plots and characters, and reworked and added to existing tales. Indeed, it seems to be a commonly held opinion that the concept of an author and his own ideas has been a comparatively recent development. Barthes himself makes reference to it, describing the Author as, "a modern figure" who "emerg[ed] from the Middle Ages," and who has strong links to the "prestige of the individual." (Barthes, 2008: 313) Foucault, too, ponders the origin of the author, discussing the subject in more detail than Barthes. The concept, he argues, began to develop in order to enforce censorship, providing a person on whom blame could be placed and punishment enacted. Later, this blame turned to praise, with rules concerning

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ownership and authors' rights being developed. In the case of the former, discourse was still "essentially an act," as it was in previous centuries, but with the advent of early copyright laws, discourse became property. (Foucault, 2008: 286) In both cases the focus is on the author as an individual, though with quite different aims. Cornel Sandvoss, in his essay, *The Death of the Reader?* (2007) also describes the "common" view of authors and texts as a relatively modern concept, stating that it is rooted in Enlightenment and Romantic thought. Thus, we begin to see that what Foucault describes as the "author-function" has been imposed on texts and other kinds of discourse by society, and so is perhaps rather unnatural. (Foucault, 2008: 285) Indeed, Foucault describes in some detail the construction by society and implications of the author function. (Foucault, 2008: 286-289)

In any case, Barthes sees this construction's role in literary culture and criticism as restrictive. "The *explanation* of a work," he says, "is always sought in the man or woman who produced it," resulting in the idea of, "a single, 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)," which must be deciphered through study not only of the text itself, but the Author's life. (Barthes, 2008: 315) This, in Barthes opinion, is limiting, since endowing a text with a "final signified" in this way, by its very nature prevents the proliferation of the multiple meanings to which he assigns so much value (Barthes, 2008: 315-316). Barthes describes a vision of the text as a "multi-dimensional space," a "tissue of quotations," which is an amalgamation and reconfiguration of elements already in existence (Barthes, 2008: 315-316). In this way, the text is to be, "*disentangled,*" rather than, "*deciphered,*" and to avoid limiting meaning; the figure of the Author must be removed (Barthes, 2008: 315-316). This removal makes way for the reader, who as, "the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed," is a participant in, and creator of meaning, rather than an interpreter or passive consumer of a work (Barthes, 2008: 316).

This idea of the reader's role as active creator rather than passive consumer is also present in Wolfgang Iser's theories, as described by Sandvoss. His ideas seems to be a development of Barthes', theorizing that a text acquires meaning only when it is being read, and that reading is a "dialogue between text and reader," (Sandvoss 2007) Thus, the reading process does not decipher a meaning endowed in the text by the Author, but rather, "the structures and figures of the text collide with the reader's (subjective) knowledge, experiences, and expectations, all in turn formed… in an

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intertextual field." Meaning is created as the reader fills in "textual gaps and blanks," in a process of "concretiz[ation]," and attempts to "normalize" the text, resulting in meaning that is "a 'mirror-reflection' of the reader." (Sandvoss 2007) Like Barthes' reader, he is an active creator of meaning, focusing on text and not Author.

So what, according to Barthes and other 'Reader Response' theorists, *are* the responsibilities of the reader? Extrapolating from the theorist's own arguments and the above discussion, three main responsibilities seem to be implied:

1.   To reject the image of the Author-God.

2.   To be open to the multiplicity of meaning.

3.   To be an active participant in the text and a creator of meaning, rather than a passive consumer.

These implied responsibilities, it could be argued, align very well with the practices and attitudes of the aforementioned fan communities, in particular with the readers and writers of fanfiction. More than anything, these fans deal on a regular basis with a great deal of multiplicity of meaning and are very comfortable with it. While, as Sheenagh Pugh (2005) notes, "the one thing all fanfic has in common is the idea of a 'canon', the source material accepted as authentic and, within the fandom, known by all readers," there is a great deal of variety in the way fans view this canon. Firstly, canon itself is considered very much open to interpretation. Fans, particularly those who read and write fanfiction, engage in detailed discussions about the possible conclusions which can be drawn from canon. Sometimes this discussion relates to how a specific fact or event should be interpreted. An example of this is a discussion at the Livejournal community MetamorFic_Moon (a community devoted to the relationship between two minor characters in the *Harry Potter* series: Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks) entitled, "The Shape-shifting Thing", where one question asked of the community members is, "Given that Harry was able to recognise Tonks at the Burrow, does that mean the heart shaped face and dark eyes are her natural form? Are the only changes she makes on a day-to-day basis her hair styles/colours?"[†] ('mrstater' 2006) The reference here is to Tonks' ability to alter her appearance at will, which appears to have been lost at this point in the story. The answer to this question might seem fairly straightforward, and yet the mere fact that it

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is being asked demonstrates the level to which even apparently straightforward elements of canon are considered to be very much open to interpretation by writers of fanfiction.

Often though, discussions relating to the interpretation of canon will focus on what can be inferred and extrapolated from the text about elements that are not directly mentioned. For instance, in another discussion at MetamorFic_Moon, the question put forward to members is, "At what point in canon do you see Remus and Tonks becoming romantically involved?" ('godricgal' 2006) The debate here centres on the issue that while a romantic relationship between the two characters is referenced in canon (they eventually marry) there is little indication within the narrative as to when this relationship might have begun, or indeed what path it might have followed.

This multiplicity of canon-interpretation is further illustrated by the existence of fanfiction and fan discussion which focus on romantic relationships that are not mentioned in the source text. 'Slash' pairings are enormously popular in nearly all fandoms, and are based upon "a reading of subtext that fans claim *is* present in canon." (Tosenberger 2008b: 187) For example, the pairing of the characters of Remus Lupin and Sirius Black appears often in Harry Potter fandom, with fans citing the characters' joint Christmas present to Harry, among other things, as evidence in favour of this relationship. (Tosenberger 2008b: 197) Furthermore, Tosenberger (2008: 191) asserts that, "the fragmentation of the fannish landscape means that in Potter fandom, there is no dominant 'One True Pairing.'" Anecdotal evidence would seem to back this up; many authors do indeed write about more than one pair of characters, and a quick glance at the index of Crack_Broom (n.d.), a fan community dedicated to the recommendation of Potter fiction and art, clearly shows the variety of relationships that fans are interested in and deem feasible.

In addition to this fannish ability to accept a variety of interpretations of canon, there is often also debate as to what constitutes canon. Contrary to what might be expected, this is almost, "never a clear-cut issue," (Tosenberger 2008b: 191) especially when a canon occurs across more than one media. Sheenagh Pugh, in her chapter on the concept of canon, gives the example of the *Blakes 7* radio plays, made several years after the television series ended, which are not considered canon by some fans. (Pugh 2005) The nature of canon is also open to debate in fandoms in which the author makes statements about the characters, settings and events outside of the texts themselves. The

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most famous example of this in the Potter fandom is Rowling's announcement, after the publication of the seventh book in the series, "that the Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore was gay," (Tosenberger 2008a: 200) turning subtext into fact. Most Potter fans accept information given by Rowling in interviews as being canon, but there are many who do not; or at least take any statements she makes with a large pinch of salt. Some of this scepticism arises from Rowling's tendency to contradict herself or her texts in interview, and indeed inconsistencies are often a reason for debate within a particular fandom as to what constitutes canon. Furthermore, canon texts can themselves be, "internally inconsistent", forcing fans to "decide which truth to accept," (Pugh 2005: 31-2) thus creating even more scope for multiple meanings within fandom.

The very nature of fanfiction and the number of fans participating in its creation also promotes this multiplicity of interpretation and meaning. Fanfiction takes a variety of genre forms; sequels, prequels, missing scenes, crossovers and alternate universes (AU), 'fics' being among the most common. Sequels, as might be expected, continue the stories where the original text left off while prequels focus on events that may have occurred before the timeframe covered in the source text. Missing scene stories fill in the gaps of a source text, exploring events that may have happened (sometimes even *must* have happened) but do not directly appear in the text. The definitions of crossover and AU stories are perhaps less obvious. Crossover fanfiction blends two or more fandoms, taking characters from one fictional universe and inserting them into another, having them interact with the characters and settings of that universe. AU stories involve "deliberate departures from canon," (Pugh 2005: 61) and range from stories which answer 'what if' questions; altering one aspect of canon and exploring the consequences, through to stories which place characters in a different time or society, or simply ignore a canonical character death.

The creation of fanfiction, and the variety of forms which it can assume, results in many possible incarnations of the characters, plot and setting of the source text. Sequel and prequel fics create infinite possibilities for the continuation of the story and the events leading up to those featured in the source text. Likewise, missing scenes expand the fictional universe of the source text, creating multiple possibilities for events occurring 'behind the scenes' of the main storyline and AUs create still further fictional possibilities. The nature of the process of writing fanfiction, where the reader hypothesises about elements of the source text which are not made explicit (and even those which

are), leads to the creation of 'personal canons;' the writer's own ideas about the course of a character's life and the elements which make up his personality. Indeed, each writer is not limited to just one 'personal canon'. Prolific writers will often have a number of personal fictional universes existing in parallel, each relating to a different group of fics, each exploring a different aspect of the characters and their stories.

Thus we can see that the writer and reader of fanfiction is very comfortable with multiple and uncertain meaning. Canon, and what constitutes it are open to, "bending and shaping" (Pugh 2005: 66), by fans, and they revel in exploring their own multiple interpretations and discovering those of others. There is a feeling within fandom that there is "no one right version" (Pugh 2005: 224) of a story, and fans delight in exploring alternative scenarios and different points of view. Pugh likens this proliferation of meaning to, "different streams flowing into an ocean, making it more than it was before" (Pugh 2005: 222). Fanfic writers thus add depth and breadth to their canon, embracing the multiplicity of meaning and uncertainty of interpretation which reader response theorists suggest the figure of the author restricts.

In addition, this method of interacting with the source text by creating multiple interpretations personal to the reader fits very well with Iser's ideas about the reading process as explained by Sandvoss (2007). The idea that the text "come[s] to life" (Sandvoss 2007: 28) through interaction with the reader as they fill in the gaps and concretize them, is exactly the process that a text is put through as a reader creates a work of fanfiction based upon it. The fanfic writer uses their own experiences, ideas and beliefs (just as is described by Sandvoss) to not only fill in the gaps in the text (the missing scene story being a direct example of this), but to expand them, excavating below and building upon them. And it is not only the gaps that are filled, but the entire area surrounding the text, sending the interpretation of meaning in an infinite number of directions. Thus the reader who writes fanfiction is very much a participant in the creation of the meaning of the source text.

Fanfiction writers are also characterised by a refusal to be passive consumers of the texts that they love. The common perception of the motive for creating such derivative works is that these readers desire either, "more of", or, "more from" (Pugh 2005: 19) the source text. In relation to the former, Pugh gives the example of those authors who have written their own Sherlock Holmes mysteries.

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These authors, says Pugh, "did not want Conan Doyle to do anything differently, just to carry on with what he was doing, and when his death intervened, they stepped into the breach." (Pugh 2005: 19) As Pugh notes, "the wish to find out 'what happened next'… is familiar to most of us." (Pugh 2005: 47) We may accept that the ending of a text is artistically appropriate, but when it comes to stories which we love, there is a sadness, as we close the book, that they do not continue any further. (Pugh 2005) Writers of fanfiction, however, refuse to passively accept this Author-imposed ending, continuing the stories themselves. A similar refusal of passivity is present where fanfiction emerges as a result of the readers desire for "more from" (Pugh 2005: 19) the source text. Pugh (2005: 19) illustrates this idea with the example of female consumers of science fiction in the 1970s, who, while enjoying the action of the dramas, also "found much wanting". These women desired character development as well as action, so they wrote it themselves. (Pugh 2005) These motives are of course not mutually exclusive, and they demonstrate much the same attitude among writers of fanfiction, namely the refusal to be a passive consumer of a text and to accept without question what the author gives them, as well as a desire to participate in the creation of meaning.

Not only do these fans refuse to be passive consumers, however, they are also more than willing to challenge the idea of the Author-god. On the simplest level, these fans are willing to be dissatisfied with the authors of the source text, and there is no taboo in expressing this dissatisfaction. Sheenah Pugh's comprehensive study of fanfiction includes countless examples of fan dissatisfaction of one kind or another. Frequently, this disappointment occurs in relation to the death of a beloved character, as with the *Hornblower* character Archie Kennedy. (Pugh, 2005) The fans' solution to this is to be active rather than passive, refusing to accept this death in their own minds and continuing to write fanfiction where he is alive. (Pugh 2005) Likewise, if a continuing series does not go in the desired direction, either in general or in relation to specific characters, fans have no issue with "'correcting' the text" (Pugh 2005: 203) through fanfic.

This possibility of frustration with the author springs mostly from the ability of the characters to take on a life of their own for fans. The two main premises of fanfiction, says Pugh, are that, "(a) fictional characters and their universes can transcend both their original context and their creator and (b) the said creator cannot know everything about them." (2005: 222) A non-fanfictional example of these premises in action is V S Prittchet's feelings about the treatment of the character

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of Becky Sharpe by Thackeray. Prittchet believes she has been wronged by Thackeray, and clearly sees himself as understanding her better than her creator, an idea which may seem a little odd on first consideration, but which Pugh (2005) explains quite plausibly. "Even if... Becky Sharpe had no one real-life modal", she asserts, Becky is not entirely original since she is created from character traits that already exist in the world. (Pugh 2005:17) Thus, it is possible for the author to "make her say or do something" that goes against the "reality" of such traits, and it is therefore also possible for a reader to understand a character better than the author does. (Pugh 2005:17) This idea, and Pugh's later image of the author as a "jackdaw"; a re-arranger of materials rather than creator, links to Barthes vision of the text as a "tissue of quotations" pieced together from existing thoughts and ideas. (Pugh 2005: 222; see Barthes, 2008: 315) Thus, the relationship between fanfiction and Reader Response seems to be strong.

There is often a tension, however, between authors and fans because of the abovementioned premises. Some authors, such as Anne Rice, dislike the lack of authorial control that fanfic and other fannish activity creates. In a statement on her website, Rice says, "it upsets me terribly to even think about fanfiction with my characters," (2002 in Pugh 2005: 13) demonstrating an especially possessive attitude towards her work. Indeed, even writers who are "flattered" by fanfiction, such as J. K. Rowling are also sometimes uneasy about the direction that their characters take in the hands of fans. (Pugh 2005) Joyce Millman, in her essay discussing the transformation of the character of Severus Snape by fanfiction writers, refers to Rowling's "frustration" with readers' love of this character who, in her opinion, is not "nice."(Millman, 2005:57) Thus it is clear that authors are influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by the prevailing idea of the Author-god, and the author is still some way from being 'dead.'

Fanfiction though, is doing all it can to kill off the Author-god. The fundamental principles of this kind of fan activity have been shown to support multiple meaning and active participation; the holy grail of Reader Response theorists. Fan presence and influence, with the help of modern technology, is growing ever stronger, eroding the power of the author, despite legal opposition. Furthermore, fanfiction as a genre demonstrates something of a return to early forms of writing before the artificial construction of the Author, where the writer was of no account, and the characters, plot and setting were free for anyone to use. Perhaps in the future, works of fanfiction

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and their source text will be viewed as one, as we view ancient myths and legends now. If this does come to pass, it will then be safe to declare, "The Author is Dead".

Glossary

Canon The source material from which fan-works are derived.

Fanfic An abbreviation of fanfiction.

Fic An individual work of fanfiction.

OTP One True Pairing: two characters who are 'meant to be'.

Ship An abbreviation of 'relationship'. Refers to sexual and/or romantic pairings of particular characters.

Slash Focuses on same-sex romantic or sexual relationships between characters, usually male.

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