

English 1101

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Immortality of the Author

Books, ripped off library shelves and thrown carelessly into a mass grave. Matches, lit and tossed atop the body of titles, pages, stories. Smoke, rising from the chapters, blackened with stolen ink and symbolic of the villainous destruction of human experience. The burning of books, the thought of collecting the documented knowledge, insights, and understandings of humanity and casting them away into the abyss, elicits a certain sense of repulsion within most people. Why is it, then, that some are so willing to do away with authors?

In his essay "The Death of the Author," the French literary theorist Roland Barthes argues that it is time for a new method of literary critique to dominate, a method in which the reader to a text. Barthes contends that by giving all the power to the reader, both the reader and text are liberated; the reader has the freedom to interpret a text as he or she sees fit and the text is no longer limited by narrow examination. But as Barthes states, freeing the reader comes at a cost: "The reader is freed from the text, but the text is freed from the reader" (Barthes "36:). In order to free the text, the author's intentions and the context over the text must be fully disregarded. The text must stand alone, free of context and the author's influence. Barthes states that annihilation of the author frees a text. In reality, however, it dilutes the effectiveness of the text.

The inability to disregard the author becomes excruciatingly clear in a study of the Irishman Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal." This piece, which is a satire

attacking both the tyrannical English and the upper class Irish concerning their treatment of the

" " c g ." "c"fg U c U' h' g' cUëg" h' g'c " eg'cUf" g gUëg" U"c"

text. In fact, this text contains two commentators, two voices battling for the pen and for control over the piece. The first and more apparent voice is that of the Proposer. It is the Proposer, whose economic tone and pragmatic proposal introduce the idea of eating the babes of impoverished families, who largely narrates the piece. The second voice is that of Swift himself, who offers biting cynicism and attacks against the wealthy that are often hidden within the

e c g " h' g'R g "Uc c U' g' gU U'dg ggU' g g' " sing forces drives A

Modest Proposal forward and makes it a piece that cannot get lost among the numerous works of

U h "e Ug c " c g gg ØC "" "f e " c g."U h "e gc U' h'c" ge Uf" eg"

alerts the reader that the proposal is a satire that is not meant to be taken at face value. For this reason, in the case of *A Modest Proposal* reader- g Ug'e e " U' g' cf U' h'Dc g s

The Death of the Author requires that the interpreter silence the intentions of not only one voice, b " Ø "cU'g c Uë U' h'L Uë cU'U h *A Modest Proposal*, it becomes clear that while the likes of Roland Barthes would advocate an analysis based solely on the impressions of the reader, it is the persistent voice and living presence of the author that makes the pamphlet a successful and lasting piece of rhetoric; the author therefore cannot be ignored.

At a certain point in reading the first two pages or so of *A Modest Proposal*, the reader is struck with the realization that the proposal outlined is not entirely serious. The manner in which the reader comes to understand the meaning of *A Modest Proposal* is outlined in Robert

R ff cU "g c ." J c g' " c gU' g A' g'Tgcf g " U'A *Modest Proposal*. "R ff cU' c g."

Y g' ge U g' c " g g' "c" c "dg ggU' g'Uë c " gcUU" cUf" g' g ."cUf" c "c"

moral- ec "c gU" "dg U "ec gf" "d " gcU" h' c f " R ff cU'82: Ø U' fg" "

The narrator is the speaking voice, the one dictating, word for word, exactly what the text says. In *A Modest Proposal*, the narrator is not Swift, but the Proposer, a fictional persona created by Swift specifically to fill this role. While the narrator is responsible for what the words say on the surface, the reader recognizes the narrator, but by Swift, the author, and from a deeper reading of the text one recognizes *A Modest Proposal* as the satire that it is. Barthes would argue that the narration and the text are one and the same as far as the reader is concerned. However, this is not the case. Although the narrator describes a proposal to sell the children, the reader recognizes the author's intention to use the contrast between two voices to provide the reader with signals as to how the piece is meant to be read, and it is these intentions that signal the reader that the entire piece is a parody.

What drives this phenomenon? How does the reader come to the realization that there is an argument within the text that lies below the surface subject of cannibalism? This is where the dueling voices come in. A master of rhetoric, Swift has created an alter ego, the Proposer, with whom the narrator's voice is in conflict. The narrator's voice is perceived by the reader. Take, for example, the sentence: "I have calculated that the food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already a great deal of other business, it may be thought proper to give them a new project of getting money out of the poor children. (Swift 3). The beginning of the sentence is dominated by the Proposer, and his economic voice rings through. The Proposer is rational and calculating, and his strict application of logos is fit for a discussion

of economics of commodities and their value on the market but it does not account for the capacity to act in a compassionate and humane manner. He begins by backing up his suggestion

of the sentence, Swift regains control. The rational and economic tone of the earlier statements are contradicted by a biting, emotionally-driven attack against the landlords. By describing the greed of the rich and their inhumane mistreatment of the poor. It is crucial to consider that at the time *A Modest Proposal* was written, the gap between the wealthy and the poor was so large that the poor masses were hardly treated like people and were completely at the mercy of the wealthy. This knowledge is crucial for their mistreatment of the poor. Because the historical background is crucial to understanding

Logically, historical mode of reading solely through the perspective of the reader would create a faulty reading of the text that neglects its overall value.

By identifying an underlying conflict the conflict of two opposing voices within *A Modest Proposal*, the reader knows there is more to the text than meets the eye. But how exactly does the reader go about recognizing, and then distinguishing, these voices? Matt Mortensen, a literary critic who has studied *A Modest Proposal*,

opposed to the idea the words are actually suggesting, cues the reader that the piece is intended to be interpreted as a satire. The success of this satire depends entirely on its intention to be read

c " e ." e " "Dc g s dismay cannot oee " Ug " g'c " g gUeg" " cf g'c c gU" "

the reader.

Barthes, however, still argues the contrary, that U" " g'fg e U' h'g g " eg" h'g g " U" h' U" Dc g "364 0Y " " c g gU."Dc g "e UgUf " c" U' g" eess of writing, the author and his voice are lost, and only the words remain to be given meaning by g' gcf g 0' g'c " eg" cU g ."c U" " " .dg gh."g g gUeg ." g" g f." ec U"cf"g g U"g g" c" " g g'c "c" U" h' U" h " g' geg0D " h' the voices of Swift and his Proposer are neglected in *A Modest Proposal*, what is left? Without the cues provided by the voices, the reader does not read the text as a satire, cU"U h " gU " pamphlet is relegated to nothing more than a bizarre and cold endorsement for cannibalism. The presence of the author proves critical in *A Modest Proposal*, cU"e U c " "Dc g s postulations, the careful reader senses his presence in every word.

Stanley Fish, a colleague of Barthes, subscribes to the idea that it is the reader, not the writer, whose understanding is important in the interpretation of a text. However, Fish concedes, to a much larger extent than does Barthes, that the writer e f Ue g " g' gcf g " gce ons. In *Surprised by Sin*, Fish authored an analysis h'L U'O U "g e" g *Paradise Lost*. Early on U' "cUe ."H " g " g'h U"cd " " g' gcf g " g Ug' "*Paradise Lost* is controlled by Milton:

Control is the important concept here, for my claim is not merely that this pattern is in the poem (it would be difficult to find one that is not), but that Milton (a) consciously put it there and (b) expected his reader to notice it. (Fish 15; emphasis in original)

While Fish believes that the response to a text is most important, he acknowledges that the author purposely crafts the text to lead readers to the responses they reach and expects the reader to recognize that the author is manipulating their reactions. In the context of *Paradise Lost*, this refers to a number of different things, such as the way in which Milton walks the reader into traps that are essential for understanding the fall of Adam and Eve and then reproaches the reader for his or her mistakes.

While *A Modest Proposal* is notably present and is essential to the work as a whole. Take, for example, the excerpt,

g gh g" " g gc ." g "U" cU" c " " g" h' g g'cUf" g" g'g gf gU .") " g' c "c" east some glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into ce eg " U h"8 OH " ight recognize this sentence as an instance in which Swift interjects himself in " g'R g " cUhg " "condemn publicly his contemporary pamphleteers for their half-hearted and inhumane suggestions. However, his focus would be on the response this interjection elicits in the audience. Upon reading this sentence, the reader feels an inexplicable sense of guilt. Although he or she is not necessarily personally responsible for the destitute condition of so many Irish citizens, the reader feels ashamed on behalf of humanity and the cruelties of which we human beings are capable. This guilt compels the reader to action, or at least serious thought, as to how the problems of 1729 Ireland (or a modern dilemma whose

U" "U "gc "h Uf "ecUdg" gfOH " ge U g " c " g' gcf g " gce U" "c" geg" " what is important, but he also salutes the author for his or her role in bringing about the expected gce U" U" g" gcf g ORg c ." U" " c ."H "c ce " " g c " Ug g c U" "c" c " h' reconciling Barthes " g " "c" g-centric method of literary analysis.

Over the course of the ever-present battle for the pen in *A Modest Proposal*, the dialogue between Swift and his fictional Proposer both secures the success of the text as a timeless satire and saves Swift from the fate prescribed by the likes of Barthes – the death of the author. It is clear that in *A Modest Proposal*, the author is very much alive. And thus a companionship is born between the reader and the author, a companionship that Fish touches upon in his analysis of *Paradise Lost*. The author deliberately guides the reader through the text by providing clues as

" " g" g " " UgUf gf" "dg" gcf." g" g" gcf g " c g " g" g " cU" cU" " f gf" through the text, carrying with him his own experiences and notions to be used in interpretation. The author need not die for the reader to live; rather, the two live in harmony to maximize the meaning and effectiveness of the written word. So, as we readers examine a text, whether it be a

c ec" g U" c" g' g " "gc U" " "e f gU" "cU" g" U" h' U." g " set down g" c e g 0Ng " g" f U' g' c e g .f " " e h ."cU" gU" e g "h " g' author has a story to tell.

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