

Exploring Foucault's Conceptualization of Authorship: A Post-Structuralist Analysis

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Abstract: *Post-Structuralist thought has critically examined the notion of the author, a significant concept, since the 1960s. Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's What is an Author? sought to examine the historical development of the author and the significance of this idea in the interpretation of both literary and philosophical texts. Foucault aims to elucidate the author's relationship with the text and the evolution of this relationship throughout different historical stages. He poses several enquiries concerning names and proper nouns, the role of the author, and classifications of authors. This study examines Michel Foucault's conceptualisations of author and authorship, analysing his overarching thought structure and historical interpretation of the formation of the Author within the Western tradition.*

Keywords: author, post-structuralism, conceptualisations, western, interpretation

I. INTRODUCTION

Foucault gained global recognition through his groundbreaking publications. His examination of contemporary discursive networks in the study of power established him as an exceptional thinker. His emphasis on enquiries concerning madness, social discipline, body image, truth, normative sexuality, and similar topics was pivotal in shaping the post-modern intellectual landscape. Although he did not acknowledge possessing a distinct methodology, his approach revolutionised the global understanding of issues such as power, knowledge, governance, self, and authorship. His historical concepts motivated historians post-1960 to concentrate on microhistories. His historical and philosophical enquiries have traversed various phases, including the archaeological, genealogical, and ethical, which have significantly influenced contemporary debates in philosophy and social theory. Foucault's works demonstrate the evolution of "truths" across different periods, eras, and cultures, illustrating how societal norms and power structures shape our understanding of knowledge and reality.

In *What is an Author?* Foucault examines the relationship between the author and the text. He concentrates on how texts reference the authorial figures. He begins his discourse by referencing his previous work, *The Order of Things*. In that book, he examines the prerequisites that enable human beings to be regarded as objects of knowledge. His objective is to elucidate the principles and regulations governing the construction of systems in the human sciences that emerged in the nineteenth century. His primary focus lies on discourses or discursive acts.

He interrogates the most essential premises of literary theory and criticism. He examines the 'functions' that the author performs within a specific discourse. He posits that the notion of an author serves as an organisational mechanism that enables readers to categorise specific texts collectively. This process results in the emergence of numerous interpretative traditions, as a distinct form of unity or coherence is perceived within the works of a particular author, which allows readers to derive various meanings and insights from those texts based on their collective understanding of the author's intent. It also posits that the author is the origin of the text's meaning.

In recent times, within the Western literary tradition, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have engaged in critical analysis of the perception of the author, which has been accorded significant prominence in the Modernity tradition. Foucault's *What is an Author?* explores Barthes' ideas regarding the notion of authorship. During the Structuralist phase of his writing, Barthes acknowledged that the "Author" arose at a particular historical juncture and scrutinised the concept of "author." Foucault had a divergent stance concerning the emergence of the Author. Foucault discusses



the notion of work and the functional role of the author, which he refers to as the author function. All interpretations of the work solely belong to the author, considering their biography, personality, and goals. Leitch asserts, "The author thus functions both to organize the vast reservoir of material that the past bequeaths us and to anchor a certain way of interpreting those materials" (16).

Foucault contends that historically, authors composed works as a means of safeguarding themselves from mortality. They believed that the writer would also be eternally remembered, as writing endures indefinitely. The notion of the tie between the author and death originated in the Greek epics. The protagonist in Greek epics seeks the perpetuation of his immortality. In the piece, Foucault references *One Thousand and One Nights*, in which Scheherazade attempts to avert death by narrating stories throughout the night. Foucault contends that the concepts of prolonging or deferring death in Greek epics and Arabian narratives were transformed by Western culture, particularly through the lens of modernity, which reinterprets these themes in the context of contemporary existential concerns and the human experience of time. The writer sacrifices his life for his craft, just as Sheherazade gave up her sleep to fight death. Foucault returns to authors from the West. He brings up the works of Faulkner, Proust, and Kafka, noting that all three authors share the trait of having characters who vanish at a crucial juncture in their stories.

Foucault starts his article with a quotation from Samuel Beckett, who stated, "What matter who's speaking? Someone said, "What matters who is speaking?" The question posed by Foucault demonstrates a degree of indifference towards the concept of the author and the existence of the author. Foucault asserts that writing transcends its inherent rules and boundaries. The objective in writing is not to showcase the process of writing itself, but rather to convey ideas and provoke thought in the reader, emphasizing the importance of content over form. Instead, it produces an area where the subject of the text vanishes forever. Writing is linked to sacrifice in this way. Writing can be a scene in which the author is murdered, and as it mutes the words of a specific person known as the author, the writing itself is a murder of its writer. We must discover the void left by the author in the event of their death or absence. In his article, Foucault critiques the concept of "humanism." Leitch says:

Foucault's ultimate target here is 'humanism', the postmedieval understanding of who and what individuals are. He highlights the historical contingency of the belief that we are individuals with unique natures, possessing coherent interior identities, motives, desires and conscious intentions that cause our actions. Humanism claims for each individual the capacities that literary criticism ascribes to authors. (18)

In the text, Foucault challenges both the concept of work and its components. He used the famous French writer Marquis de Sade, who was not regarded as an author during his lifetime, to illustrate his point. He was often regarded as an insane person who was driven by a powerful impulse to write down his wants. If readers are aware of this, Foucault asks if they can think of his writings as nothing more than rolls of scrawled paper. Subsequently, he considers all types of writing and declares that written forms, including drafts and addresses, are considered works. Foucault addresses the idea of writing in the article's latter section. Foucault additionally examines the mechanisms by which an author's name "operates" within our culture. Upon extensive examination of proper names, he believes that the names of authors frequently fulfil a classificatory role. The author-function, as he posits, unveils the convergence of a multifaceted network of discursive acts that shape our understanding of authorship, authority, and the interpretation of texts within cultural contexts.

Foucault categorizes the author-function into four distinct characteristics; Foucault posits that at a specific historical juncture; certain texts and discourses begin to possess authorship. Such authors were held accountable for their writings or lectures. Authors were penalized for transgressive discourses. According to Foucault, the author functions ideologically and is not only a characteristic of the text. Second, different texts exhibit varying author functions. For instance, throughout the Middle Ages, scientific publications required authors to validate their veracity, whereas fictional texts did not have such a requirement. Anonymity was deemed unacceptable in the context of scholarly literature. Foucault asserts:



The “author function” is not universal or constant in all discourse. Even within our civilization, the same types of texts have not always required authors, there was a time when those texts which we now call “literary” (stories, folk tales, epics, and tragedies) were accepted, circulated, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author. (28) During the Middle Ages, texts related to scientific fields like cosmology, medicine, and geography were considered credible only if the names of the authors were included. According to Foucault, during the 17th and 18th centuries, scientific books began to assert their authority, becoming objective and subject to evaluation based on the arguments they contained rather than the reputation of the individual writer. In the modern era, literary works started to be evaluated based on the author’s perspective. leading to the emergence of “Shakespeare” as an “author function,” rather than merely as an individual who frequented London theaters throughout the Elizabethan period.

Thirdly, in most cases, the concept of an author for a book originates from the assumption that an author exists independently of the text itself. The author does not manifest inside the text. The author’s role is not established spontaneously through a mere assignment of discourse to an individual. It arises from diverse cultural constructs, wherein we select specific characteristics of an individual as “authorial” traits while disregarding others.

Foucault posits that philosophers and poets are not considered writers in identical manners; yet there exist certain transhistorical constants in the cultural construction of authorship. He regards St. Jerome as the “author function.” Ultimately, the author serves as a distinct source of expression, equally represented with comparable validity across various forms, including texts, letters, fragments, and drafts. The author’s name, unlike a proper name, remains inside the boundaries of the texts. The concept of the author does not relate to the individual writer. It is a multifaceted linguistic process that can produce numerous identities. He asserts that when a novel employs a first-person narrator, the “I” denotes a position that society designates as “author,” but it could be identified by an alternative title.

Foucault posits that it is erroneous to regard the author’s duty as merely a straightforward reconstruction of a truth, as the text is composed of several signs that allude to the author. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that these elements exert varying influences on the text in relation to the author. Foucault concludes his discourse on the author-function in the subsequent lines:

the “author function”- function is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy. (31)

Foucault argues that the author function has not always been considered crucial for understanding and interpreting texts. He suggests that before 1500, anonymous works were common. The importance assigned to authors differs across various fields. For example, a contact does not have an identifiable author. We often do not remember the authors of newspaper articles. In contemporary discourse, an author’s name has become a marker of prestige.

In the concluding section of the article, Foucault explores the concept of a trans discursive position. He argues that figures such as Homer, Aristotle, the Church Fathers, early mathematicians, and the founders of the Hippocratic tradition all contributed to this idea. Additionally, he contends that individuals like Marx and Freud fundamentally transform entire paradigms of thought; the discourses they create elevate them beyond mere “authors” or “author functions,” as previously discussed. I will refrain from delving further into Foucault’s thesis on this matter, as it would draw us deeper into his role as a pioneer of discourse analysis. Foucault asserts:

The distinctive contribution of these authors is that they produced not only their own work, but the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts. In this sense, their role differs entirely from that of a novelist, for example, who is basically never more than the author of his own text. Freud is not simply the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* or *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious* and Marx is not simply the author of the *Communist Manifesto* or *Capital*: they both established the endless possibility of discourse. (32)

Foucault asserts that Marx and Freud did not merely write specific books; instead, they created frameworks and potentialities for subsequent texts, enabling the exploration of new ideas and concepts across various fields. As a result,



they established a new domain of divergence within their discourse. Their discourses are applicable and can be used as frameworks, whereas the discourse of a single book cannot serve that purpose. For example, Marxism can be used as a framework for analysing a novel, but a novel cannot effectively serve as a framework for analysing Marxism.

Foucault concludes that the concept of speech is not uniform but is influenced by cultural contexts. Each community possesses its distinct interpretation of conversation. To better understand Foucault's point, we should compare his text with Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author". The fundamental premise of both works is similar; they assert that a literary piece should be defined by its criteria and language, rather than through the lens of its creator. Barthes argues that the emergence of the reader necessitates the demise of the author. In response, Foucault deconstructs the myth of authorship and explores the relationship between the author and the work. Both writers contend that authorship distorts and constrains writing, leading to the conclusion that they both contribute to the author's demise.

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