

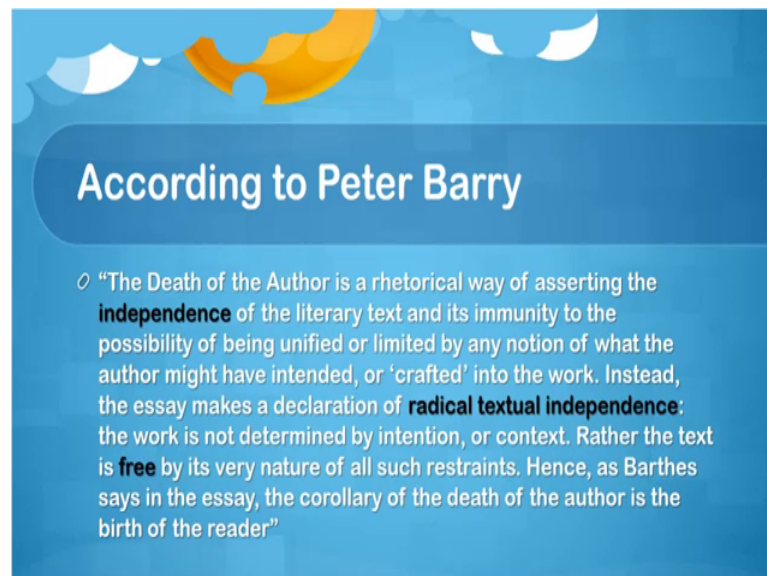
Postmodernism in Literature
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Lecture – 03a
Week - 02
The Death of the Author and its postmodern implications

Good morning and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course postmodernism in literature. In continuation with the previous session we shall be discussing the essay the death of the author by Roland Barthe as we have indicate the earlier this is a seminal essay which is located in a transitional phase.

This is also considered as an important piece in the understanding of postmodern literary critical practices and also in the understanding of a postmodern shift in the understanding of subject in the understanding of narrative and even in the meaning making process.

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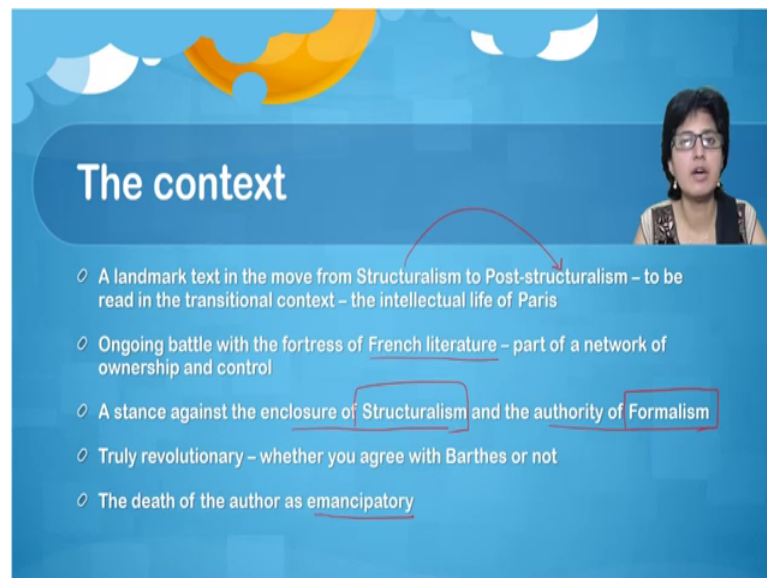
So, continuing our discussion we begin looking at one of the statements made by Peter Barry in his important work beginning theory. He talks about the death of the author in such a way that he locates its importance in within contemporary critical theory.

Peter Barry writes the death of the author is a rhetorical way of asserting the independence of the literary text and its immunity to the possibility of being unified or

limited by any notion of what the author might have intended or crafted into the work instead the essay makes a declaration of radical textual independence.

The work is not determined by intention or context rather the text is free by its very nature of all such restraints. Hence as Barthes says in the essay the corollary of the death of the author is the birth of the reader; As some of the things Peter Barry talks about we shall come back to discuss in detail.

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The context

- A landmark text in the move from Structuralism to Post-structuralism – to be read in the transitional context – the intellectual life of Paris
- Ongoing battle with the fortress of French literature – part of a network of ownership and control
- A stance against the enclosure of Structuralism and the authority of Formalism
- Truly revolutionary – whether you agree with Barthes or not
- The death of the author as emancipatory

And moving on; it is very important to understand the context which produced this essay by path the death of the author. Barthes essay and his pronouncement of the death of the author needs to be understood within the intellectual life of a Paris especially in the 1960's. So, there was a particular move within the European tradition from the 1950's onwards which placed an over emphasis on the idea the identity of the author.

So, we need to understand that Barthes was in certain way is responding to and reacting against such dominant tendencies. And this becomes very important to contextualise the essay the death of the author. So, in that sense we can understand this understand this essay as a landmark text in the move from structuralism to poststructuralism.

So, as we have indicated in one of the earlier sessions Roland Barthes; when he began his carrier he was he began with a very pre dominant structuralist mode, but it is with this essay the death of the author that we began to see the post structuralist tendencies

emerging from Barthes works and also his attitude towards criticism theory and general and also most of the things in general.

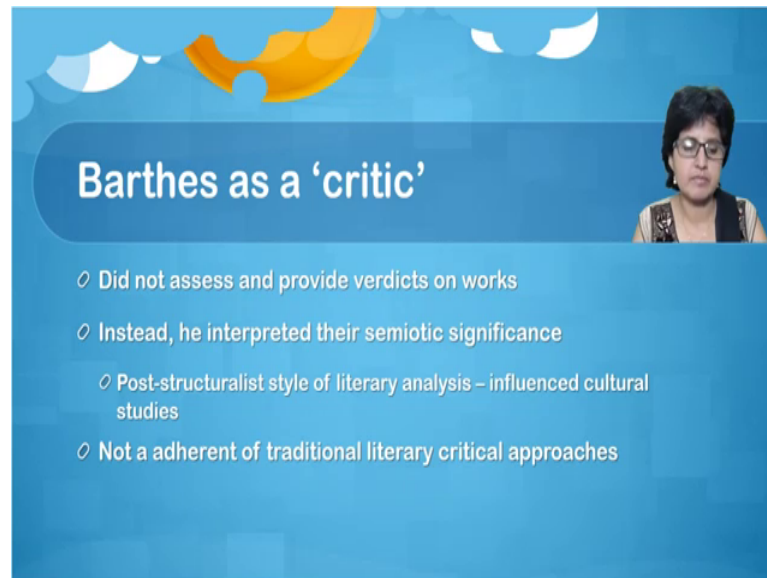
And this essay needs to be read in this transitional context and also as a response to some of the things that we are considered more important during those period. And Barthes essay also needs to be seen as part of an ongoing battle within the fortress of French literature. And French literature during that time particularly in the late 50s and 1960s it was a part of a network of ownership and control.

So, Barthes was in multiple ways responding to these dominant tendencies of that period particularly in Paris. And even today when we look at this essay death of the author we can see that there is a clear stance that Barthes displays against the enclosure of structuralism and the authority of formalism. So, in certain ways we can see kind of a departure away from the structuralist modes and also away from the formalist modes. if you know the history of particular theory we also know that in the 40s and 50s the dominant modes of understanding literary text were also related to were also in connection with the understanding of the author.

So, in multiple ways Barthes is challenging this traditional literary critical approach and also foregrounding newer ways of looking at text and the author. And also and also celebrating the emergence of the reader as a corollary and whether we agree are not with Barthes the revolutionary aspect of this text cannot be denied at all. Because this is located as at such a transitional phase that it becomes a seminal text even in a discussions related to postmodernism to be able to understand how the intellectual tradition was forged in such a way that the postmodern tendencies also celebrated a radical move away a radical shift from the literary from the traditional understandings of literatures and the reading of literature.

So, though death is usually seen as something not very positive; in this essay we can see that Barthes is using the as idea of death the aspect of death as a emancipatory event. So, here the death of the author does not mark the end of anything, but it only marks a beginning of a new era beginning of a new kind of mode new kind of rear and emancipatory reading in which reader assumes more relevance, reader assumes more significance than that of the author.

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Barthes as a 'critic'

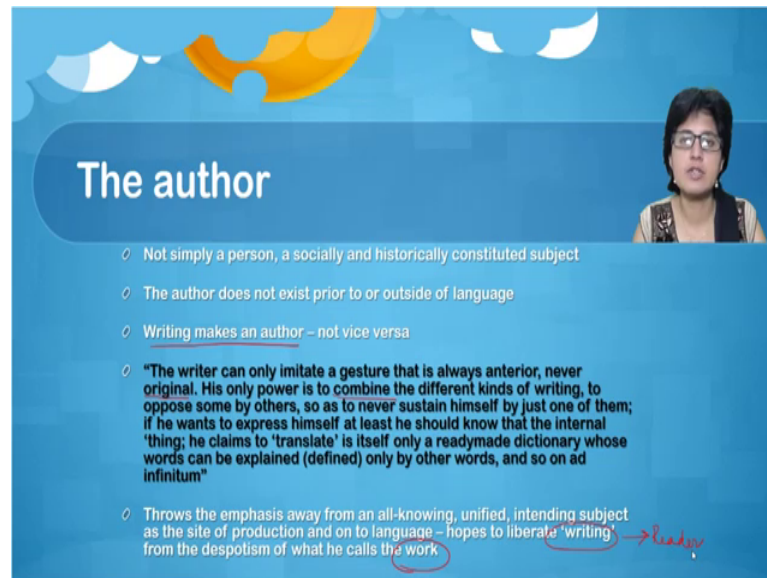
- Did not assess and provide verdicts on works
- Instead, he interpreted their semiotic significance
 - Post-structuralist style of literary analysis – influenced cultural studies
- Not a adherent of traditional literary critical approaches

So, having said that it is also important to stress the fact that Barthes never saw himself as a critic; in fact, he was very uncomfortable with this identification of him as a critic. Because he did not assess or provide wordings on particular literary works; if we look at his the general copies of his work we understand that he only interpreted the semiotic significance of works.

And more often they not heat did not focus on particular works he only refer to a general system of works and semiotic and in analysing their semiotic significance he also he also opened up newer avenues to engage with literary text. And here it is also important to remember that it was this kind of post structuralist analysis of literary text that led to the that made that played a major role in the emergence of various methodologies and techniques; within cultural studies.

And in various ways when we look back at Barthes works, we find that he was not in adherent of traditional literary critical practices, but by challenging those practices he in fact, was opening up newer avenues for us to engage with the literature and culture in general.

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The author

- ◊ Not simply a person, a socially and historically constituted subject
- ◊ The author does not exist prior to or outside of language
- ◊ Writing makes an author – not vice versa
- ◊ "The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as to never sustain himself by just one of them; if he wants to express himself at least he should know that the internal 'thing; he claims to 'translate' is itself only a readymade dictionary whose words can be explained (defined) only by other words, and so on ad infinitum"
- ◊ Throws the emphasis away from an all-knowing, unified, intending subject as the site of production and on to language – hopes to liberate 'writing' → *lead in* from the despotism of what he calls the work

In continuation with the previous session, where we started looking at some of the particular aspects of the essay we continue to look at how Barthes locates the significance of the author. And here we also realise it for Barthes author ceases to be a common place a common sensible figure. He tries to understand the author as the socially constructed and historically constituted subject and here the author ceases to be simply a person.

But he becomes a product of history a product of the societal compulsion as well and also continuing with his structuralist tendencies, but also places on record that the author does not exist prior to or outside of language the existence of author the identification and the idea of the author, it access only within the structures of language it is impossible to make sense of an author just as a person outside the systems of language. In that sense Barthes goes on to suggest that it is not the author who makes the writing, but on the contrary writing makes an author.

So, the writing instead of seeing it as a product of the author Barthes sees the author being constructed through his writing; Barthes seeing the author assuming an identity of his own assuming a character and stature of his own through the kind of writings that he produces. In that sense from this point of from this point of time, from the moment the death of the author the essay gets published we find a foregrounding of the text we find a

foregrounding of the reader and all said we also find that the author loses the elevated status that he held until that point of time.

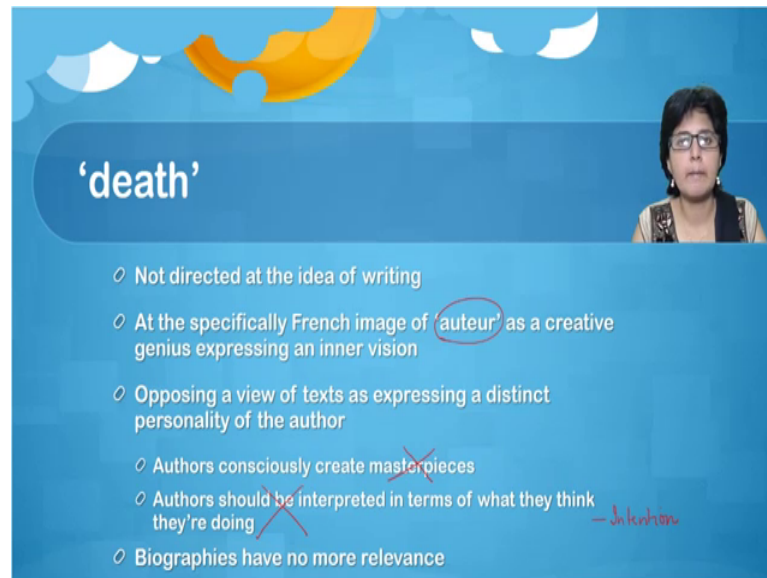
And in Barthes own words the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior never original. His only power is to combine different kinds of writing to oppose some by others. So, as to never sustain himself by just one of them, if he wants to express himself at least he should know that the internal thing he claims to translate is itself only a readymade dictionary whose words can be explained defined only by other words and so, on add infinitum.

So, here Barthes is challenging the very idea of the writer producing original works. And he says that all that the writer does perhaps is combined various kinds of things should always already available. So, it is this combination which makes the writing different or distinct from one another and it is never dependant on the originality or the genius as we would say of the author.

So, here Barthes is throwing the emphasis away from an all knowing and unified intending subject as a site of production on to language. And he hopes that through this process, through this critical unpacking of the idea of the author, the idea of the text he hopes to liberate writing from the despotism of what he calls the work.

So, here writing becomes the central factor rather than the work or the book or the text as we would call it; writing becomes a central aspect with which the reader engages. So, the ultimate communication is between the writing between the text and the reader and the author loses his significance entirely in this sort of an analysis.

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- Not directed at the idea of writing
- At the specifically French image of 'auteur' as a creative genius expressing an inner vision
- Opposing a view of texts as expressing a distinct personality of the author
- ~~○ Authors consciously create masterpieces~~
- ~~○ Authors should be interpreted in terms of what they think they're doing~~ — intention
- Biographies have no more relevance

And when Barthes talks about death; his death is not directed the idea of writing. He does not mean that the writing will come to an end or that he does not try to dismiss the process of writing altogether, but on the contrary he uses the term death to address specifically this French image of auteur and it is the French word for author as a creative genius expressing an inner vision.

So, the by attributing certain particular and specific traits to the author of having originality, of having genius there is also a sense of power being bestowed upon the author. So, Barthes is in fact, reacting against those sorts of attributions to the author and he is also opposing a view of text as expressing a distinct personality of the author.

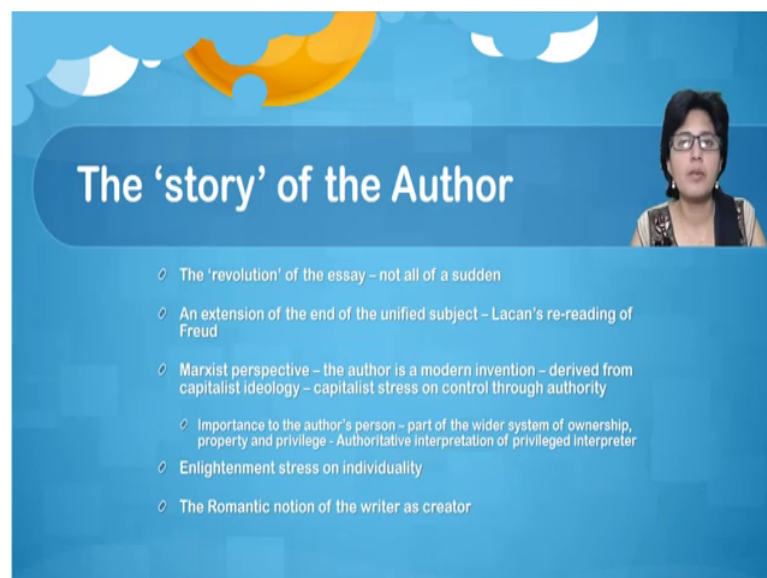
Because in Barthes analysis the text need not and perhaps may not at all reflect the personality of the author. So, it is completely futile attempt according to Barthes to try look for the personality of the author within a text and equally if you try to hope to be able to understand the text in accordance with the biography of the author.

So, here contrary to the popular assumption that authors consciously create masterpieces; we find Barthes totally challenging and even rejecting this idea. In the similar way he also completely rejects the idea that the author should be interpreted in terms of what they think they are doing the intention of the author becomes completely irrelevant. It is only the intention and only the meaning that the reader attributes to the text becomes important at the end of the day.

And in Barthes approach and when he pronounces the death of the author the biography of the author ceases to have any relevance. So, any kind of biographical or historical criticism completely falls apart when we look at it through the lines of Barthes essay and here he is also trying to tell us that the author is perhaps no more important than a perhaps a scientist who is doing an experiment.

The biography of the author the personality of the author ceases to be important; just like the details about the personality of the scientist ceases to be important when he is performing a scientific experiment.

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- The 'revolution' of the essay – not all of a sudden
- An extension of the end of the unified subject – Lacan's re-reading of Freud
- Marxist perspective – the author is a modern invention – derived from capitalist ideology – capitalist stress on control through authority
 - Importance to the author's person – part of the wider system of ownership, property and privilege - Authoritative interpretation of privileged interpreter
- Enlightenment stress on individuality
- The Romantic notion of the writer as creator

While we totally admit the revolutionary ideas that this essay was foregrounding was upholding. We cannot entirely say that the revolution of the essay, happen all of a sudden, there is an intellectual tradition attached to it there is a historical precedence as well. In fact, Barthes approach Barthes pronounce Barthes pronouncing the death of the author could be seen as an extension of the end of the unified subject as acan had done in his re-reading of Freud.

Barhtes was heavily influenced by Lacans re reading Lacans approaches and he too find that there is an extension of some of Lacans views that they find in Barthes articulation of the death of the author as well. And also as a cruluray we can even take a look at the Marxist perspective which understood the author as a very modern invention just like Barthes does. And it is also there is a Marxist belief that the idea of the author was

derived from the capitalist ideology and it is it is also reflection of the capitalist stress on control through authority.

So, when Barthes is talking about the author; when Barthes is trying to liberate the author from the certain common sensilic understanding from certain traditional clutches; he is also participating in this in intellectual tradition which had an exploring the idea of the author; which had been talking about the various ways in which the author could be constructed the author could be accessed.

And here we also important to remember that the Marxist ideology just like Barthes would also Barthes (Refer Time: 14:42) later lead us towards they also believe that the idea of the author was also akin to attaching more importance to an authors person. And in that sense the author also becomes a part of the wider system of ownership property and privileges like we see even today.

And there is also an authoritative interpretation and the presence of a privilege interpreter that we would see when we foreground the presence of the author; when we foreground the dominance of the author. So, we find Barthes in certain in multiple ways responding to all of these things and also drawing from some of those ongoing intellectual traditions and intellectual conversations of the twentieth century.

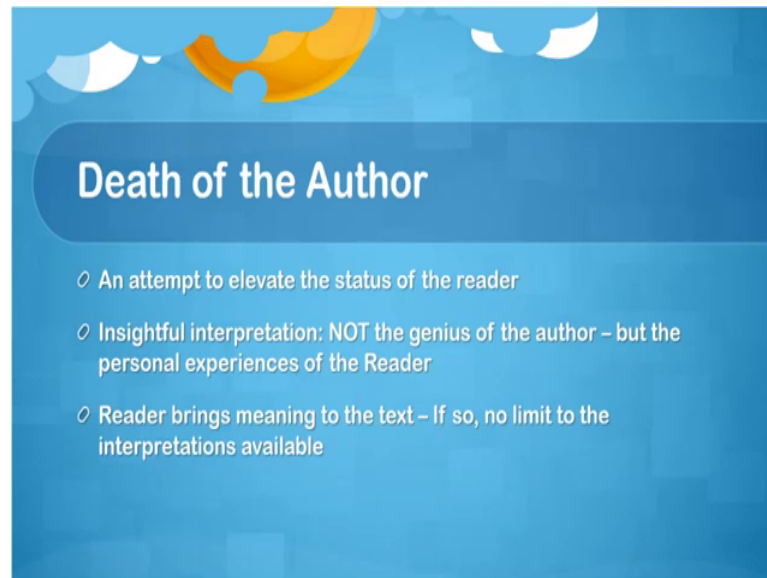
And we can also say that a certain kind of precedence could be found in the stress that the enlightenment placed on the individual on individuality. So, there is a way in which the author figure underwent particular transitions through these different ideological moves, through these different socio-political movements. And we find that Barthes essay needs to be accessed needs to be read and understood in the context of this various historical precedence's as well.

And there is also this romantic notion of the writer as a creator; writer as a subjective identity. And if you remember there is a way in which the idea of the author underwent a radical change during the romantic period especially with the publication of the prefix to lyrical ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge where together they looked at the idea of the poet and spoke about the poet as merely as a man who is talking to other man.

So, there were particular attributes they gave to the poet, but nevertheless we find that there was a radical shift in the idea of understanding the poet. So, in this sense always

throughout history; we do see that the idea of the author the sort of attributes that we give to the author had always been changing historically ideologically, but, but; however, Barthes was the only one who pronounce the death of the author. So, that we can look back and trace the intellectually which let eventually to the death of the author through a series of historical socio political and literary and critical changes.

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So, eventually when Barthes talks about the death of the author; what he attempts is to elevate the status of the reader. Until that point of time the reader was not a significant identity to deal with. And we also find Barthes arguing that and if a text renders an insightful interpretation if a text lends itself to a particular kind of an interpretation it is not because of the genius of the author, but because of the personal experiences of the reader.

We also find a certain attributes of the romantic of the romantic strain also coming in this approach, but nevertheless we can find that rather categorically privileges the reader over the author. And here he even goes on to argue that it is the reader who brings meaning to the text and in that sense even if it is a reader who brings meaning to the text there could be multiple readers.

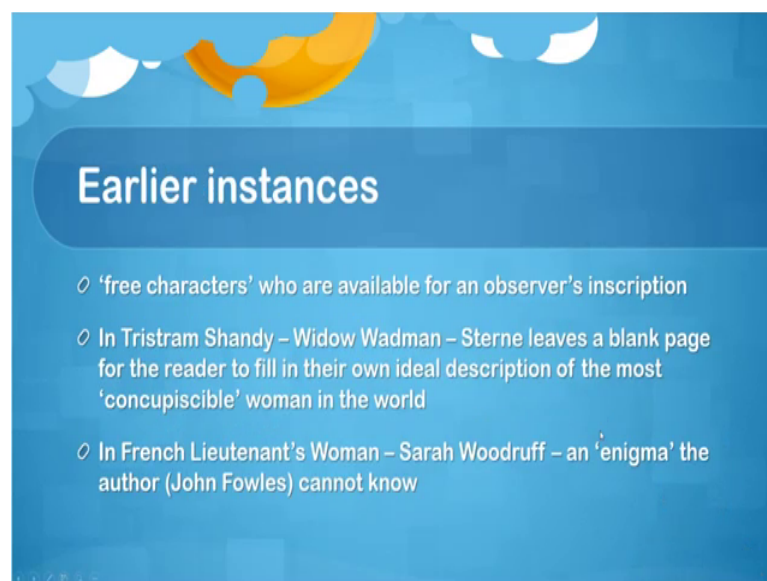
And there also exists the possibility of multiple interpretations available, there are no limits to the number of interpretations available, the kind of interpretations available

because that is we can not set any limit to the kind of personal experiences that the various readers had gone through.

Here the death of the author is not just about the author, but it is also about various other things happening at the same time the emergence of the author and also the possibility of multiple interpretations. Even today if we are able to look at to watch a movie and give our own comments and regardless of what the director of the movie thought about, regardless of what originally a scene intended this is also because we had been given this freedom to interpret the text in whichever way we want.

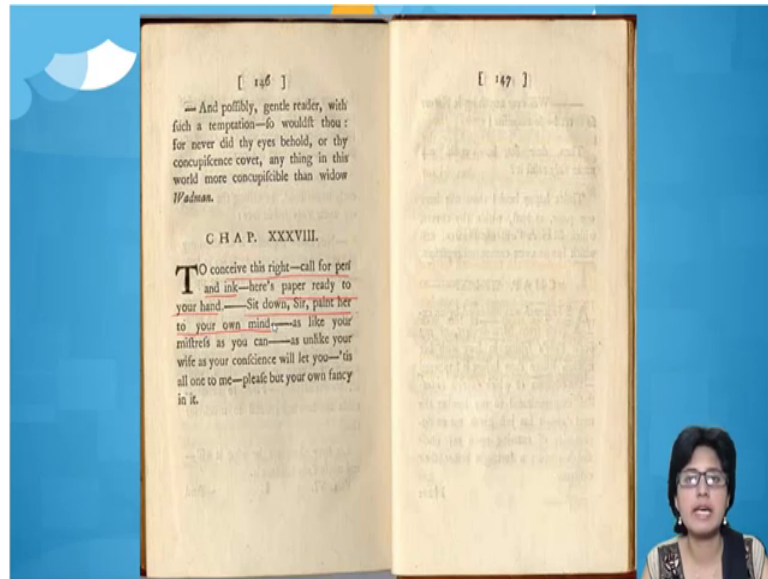
And here we also we remember that the wave less platforms which had been opened up to the various social media platforms today also celebrate this idea of multiplicity and plurality to such an extent that; every reader every single subject is capable of providing there own interpretation to not just text, but also to various situations in the contemporary all around us.

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Perhaps the most significant example that would come to our mind would be Tristram Shandy the novel by Lawrence Sterne. And here there is a character widow Wadman and to know to talk about the character Lawrence Sterne feels that he is incapable of describing the character and so, he leaves a blank page for the reader to fill in their own ideal description of the most concupiscible woman in the world.

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So, here is how the text looks like he leaves an entire page with an invitation to the reader to fill it; you can see this right call for pen and ink here is a paper ready to your hand sit down sir paint her to your own mind here. So, here is a text from the seventeenth century which invites the reader to participate in the production of the writing.

Here is an author who is willing to go to the background and give the freedom to the reader to co participate in the creation of a text. And there is also John Fowles novel French lieutenants woman, where the author when he talks about this particular character Sarah Woodruff he says that the character is an enigma that he cannot know and he also confess he also moves away from the Sterne's of an omission omnipotent narrator and confesses to the reader that he does not know anything more than the reader knows by now.

So, there are these instances that we can find in literary texts challenging the idea of the author and foregrounding and giving sort of a freer hand to the interpretation and to the imagination of the reader. And Barthes essay in multiple ways it consolidates all of these events it consolidates many of these approaches and gives it within a theoretical critical frame work.

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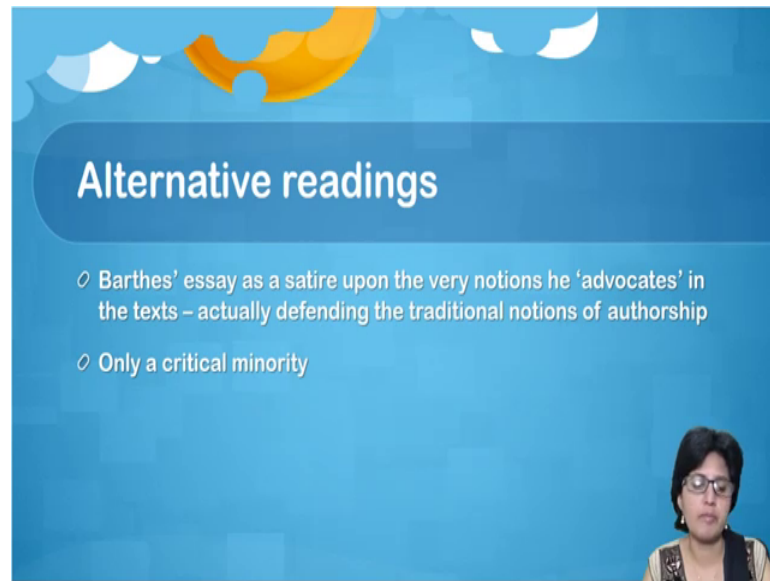
Barthes' approach

- ◊ Shares much in common with the Yale School of deconstructionist critics
- ◊ Paul de Man, Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman – 1970s
- ◊ Insists upon the disjointed nature of texts, their fissures of meaning and their incongruities, interruptions and breaks
- ◊ Not the origin – only the destination matters

And when we talk about Barthes approach; we may also note certain similarities with the Yale school of the deconstructionist critics who were popular in the 1970s they were four of them who made this particular school extremely popular during the 1970's Paul de Man, Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman.


And they also insisted a point insisted upon the disjointed nature of text their fissures of meaning and their incongruities interruptions and breaks we find Barthes essay having a lot of similarity with these critics who emerged in the 1970s and just like Barthes these the Yale school of deconstructionist critics also believe that it is not the origin, but the destination that mattered more.

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Alternative readings

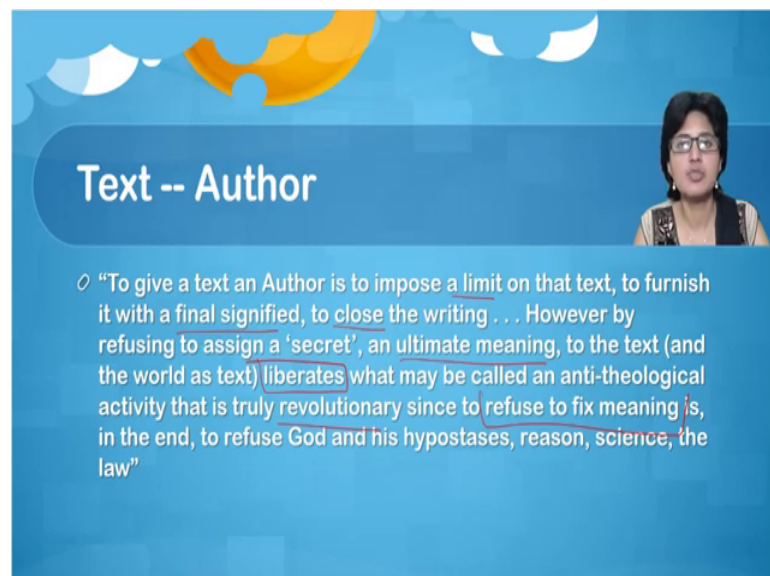
- Barthes' essay as a satire upon the very notions he 'advocates' in the texts – actually defending the traditional notions of authorship
- Only a critical minority



They have also been alternative readings about Barthes essay the death of the author. Some have even tried to read this essay as a satire upon the very notions that Barthes advocates in the text.


Actually some have argued that Barthes is perhaps different in traditional notions of authorship in a very satirical way, but this sort of an approach has only been accepted by a critical minority. And most of the leading critics, most of the leading theorists not really subscribed to this view that Barthes actually was presenting in this essay as a satire.

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Text -- Author

○ "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 . . . However by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and the world as text) liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law"



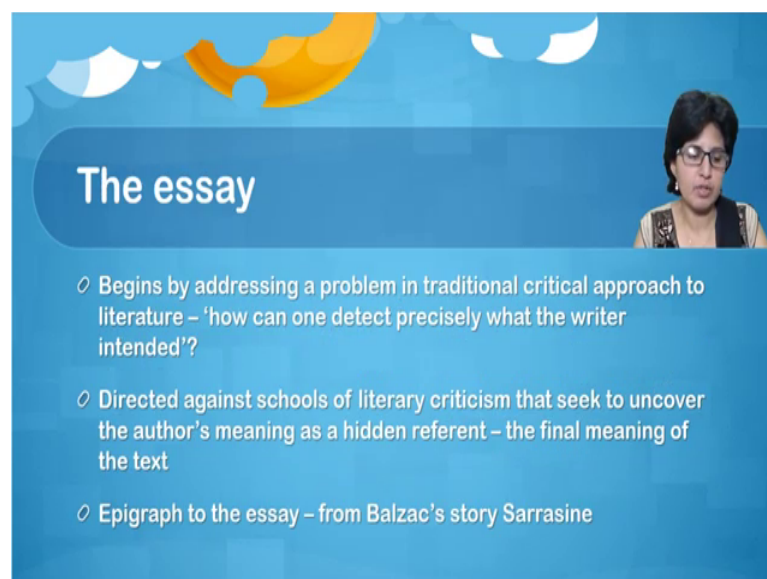
Now, trying to highlight the intentions of the essay the death of the author; we have also pointed out that there is a transition that happens in the understanding of the text and also in the sort of privileges that are being attributed to the author.

In Barthes own words 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; however, by refusing to assign a secret an ultimate meaning to the text and the world as text liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity. That is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is in the end to refuse god and his hypostases reason science the law.

So, here when Barthes is trying to liberate the text from the author; he is also trying to liberate the text from the limits which had been imposed upon it by various external aspects. It could be dominant critical practices, it could be the ideas of reason and science, it could be the methods of reading it, it could be the methods of criticism. So, here Barthes is embarking upon a task to liberate the text from the author the figure whom Barthes understands as being extremely authoritative and also not allowing any other possible interpretations.

And this refusal to assign one particular meaning to a text Barthes argues would eventually lead to the emergence of freer and multiple meanings and emergence of a celebration of a plurality.

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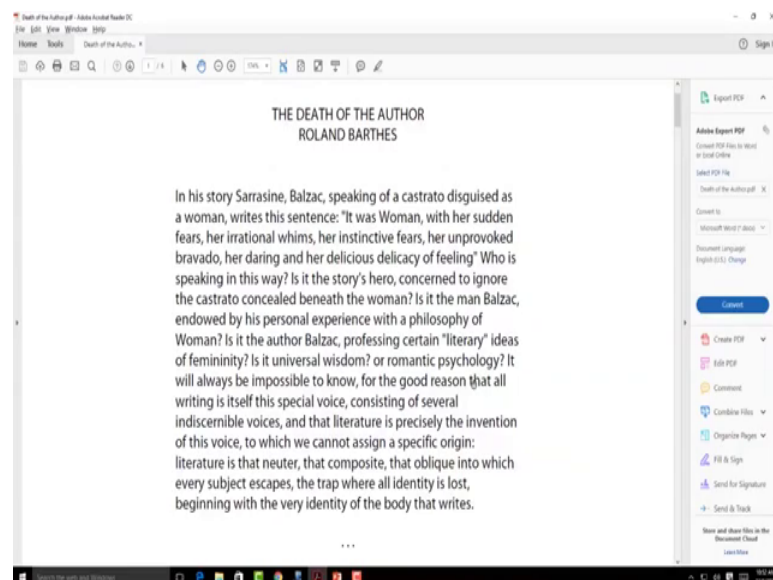
The essay

- Begins by addressing a problem in traditional critical approach to literature – 'how can one detect precisely what the writer intended'?
- Directed against schools of literary criticism that seek to uncover the author's meaning as a hidden referent – the final meaning of the text
- Epigraph to the essay – from Balzac's story Sarrasine

And if you look at the way in which Barthes is structured this essay; he begins by addressing a problem in traditional critical approach to literature. And he also asks this question how can one detect precisely what the writer entitled? And most of his most of his arguments in this essay we can say see that they are all detected against particular schools of literary criticism that seeks to uncover the authors meaning as a hidden reference.

And also there is an attempt to entirely reject the journey seeking the final meaning of the text. Because Barthes argues that there is absolutely no final meaning for a text; it is only the only the various meanings that particular readers would assign to it. Barthes begins this essay with an epigraph that is about Balzac's story Sarrasine.

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If we try to read the essay the death of the author which is also a very short which is just about 5 or 6 pages; I strongly encourage you to take a look at the original before we continue with the discussions as well. So, Barthes begins with an epigraph where he talks about story by Balzac which is Sarrasine. And here Barthes begins this discussion about a castrato disguised as a woman who writes one particular sentence I will read it out for you.

It was woman with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive fears, her unprovoked bravado, her daring and her delicious delicacy of feeling. And looking at this sentence written by Balzac in this story Sarrasine; Barthes now asks a series of questions

who is speaking in this way? Is it the stories hero concerned to ignore the castrato concealed beneath the woman? Is it the man Balzac endowed by his personal experience with a philosophy of woman? Is it the author Balzac professing certain literary ideas of femininity? Is it a universal wisdom or romantic psychology? And then he says it would it will always be impossible to know.

So, here Barthes talks about multiple possibilities when he tries to discern the voice which is uttering that sentence; it could be the character, it could be a particular philosophy which influence the author and one will not even know whether it is a philosophy that influence a character or the author. And Barthes also tells us right on our face right at the outset of the essay that it will always be impossible to know. And in certain ways we can say that Barthes essay the death of the author is also an engagement with this impossibility to know.

And the what makes it more postmodern in certain ways is that Barthes does not make an attempt to know; rather he celebrates this impossibility to know. And here is where we find also a radical difference that we noticed earlier in our discussions as well from modernism to postmodernism; rather than lamenting the fact that it is impossible to know whose voice it is, whose literary voice it is.

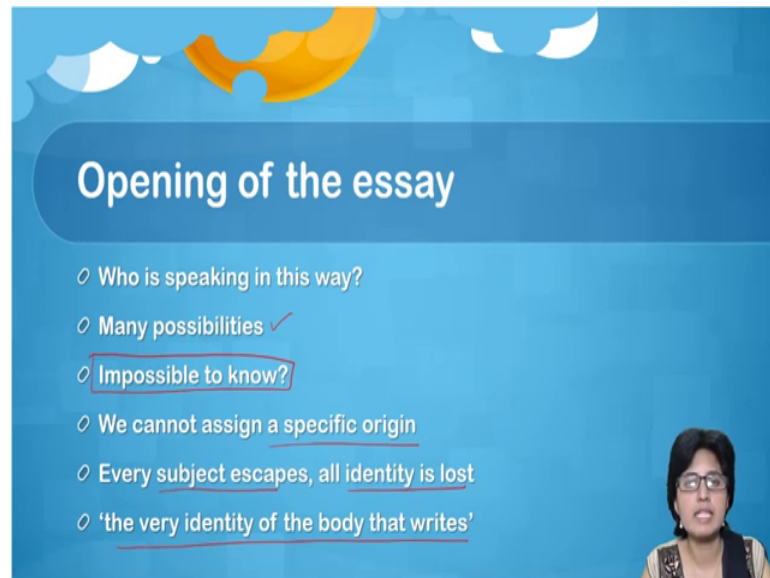
Barthes is here inviting us to be a part of this exercise of celebrating the impossibility of knowing. Because within the impossibility of knowing; lies the many possibilities of plural and multiple interpretations. Within this impossibility also lies the liberating effect of giving voice to the voices that were either to unheard of. And also within this impossibility of knowing lies a certain kind of a liberation for the reader who is not constrained within particular aspect of reading or within particular methods of reading.

And he he goes on to talk about this impossibility to know and he says for the good reason that all writing is itself this special voice consisting of several indiscernible voices. And that literature is precisely the invention of this voice to which we cannot assign a specific origin. Literature is that neuter that composite that oblique into which every subject escapes; the trap where all identity is lost beginning with the very identity of the body that writes.

So, in the beginning of the essay in this epigraph itself Barthes pronounces that the very identity of the body that writers lost in this entire process. So, he begins by talking about

the death of the author which happens, which takes place even at the even as a process of writing is completed. And here it is also interesting to note that Barthes does not romanticise the idea of the author; in instead he only looks at the author as a body that writes. And this epigraph is important to set the tone to set the stage for the discussions that are to follow.

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Opening of the essay

- Who is speaking in this way?
- Many possibilities ✓
- Impossible to know?
- We cannot assign a specific origin
- Every subject escapes, all identity is lost
- 'the very identity of the body that writes'

To sum up in the opening of the essay Barthes begins by asking this question about Balzac's story who is speaking in this way; he talks about the many possibilities that are inherent in any traditional literary critical approaches. And then he highlights and rather asserts the fact that it is impossible to know which also remains as a key for understanding any postmodern text.

And he also asserts that we cannot assign a specific origin because it is impossible for us to know. And also asserting and also identifying a specific origin would also mean that one would not be able to pursue the various other kinds of meaning which are which are being made possible by the text. And then he also talks about how every subject escapes all identity is lost including the very identity of the body that writes.

So, Barthes begins this essay with this note that there is no point looking at; there is no point trying to identify the voice. There is no point in trying to locate the identity of the author because in this in this practice of writing; in this practice of literature every subject own identity including the identity of the body that writes this material and it

ceases to exist because it does not really help like we thought it would in the meaning making process.

So, with this we come to an end of today's lecture in the next session; we shall be taking a further detail enclosure look at the entire essay. I would also strongly encourage you to take a look at the original essay and also be familiar with it. So, that it would make more sense to you as we discuss it step by step in the next session.

Before we wind up it is also important to remember that though this text was written as a during a transitional phase from the from the structuralist motto towards poststructuralist practices; now it has become an important text in understanding literature our culture and even the contemporary which is entirely devoid of this author figure, which is entirely about multiple interpretations and pluralities.

So, this text in multiple ways continues to be seminal in our understanding of postmodern literature, in our understanding of postmodern critical practices and in our understanding of how the idea of the text how the idea of the author and also how the emergence of the reader becomes extremely significant in understanding postmodernism in literature.

Thank you for listening I will look forward to see you in the next session.