

In the Footsteps of Ursula Todd: A Journey through the Author's Demise and Resurgence in Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life*

على خطى اورسولا تود: رحلة عبر موت المؤلف وعودة ظهوره في رواية كيت اتكينسون الحياة بعد الحياة

Sur les traces d'Ursula Todd : un voyage à travers la mort et la résurgence de l'auteur dans *Une vie après l'autre* de Kate Atkinson

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Introduction

An intricate debate has sparked within the realms of literary and cultural criticism as a result of Roland Barthes's declaration of "The Death of the Author" and Michel Foucault's subsequent reflections on authorship. This parley has challenged traditional conceptions of authorial intent and the interpretive authority of the creator. In these discussions, the very essence of what it means to create and interpret textual works is investigated; the question being asked here is whether the presence of the author looms large over the landscape of textual analysis or whether it is, in fact, a specter that has been rightfully exorcised in the pursuit of a more liberated interpretive space (Ameur-Said, 2024).

By entirely severing the interpretive link to the author, this research paper argues that although Barthes's announcement of the author's death serves as a vital milestone in redefining textual interaction; it also misses the intricate interplay that exists between the author, the text, and the reader (Hamza Reguig–Mouro, 2014). Hence, this article will illustrate that the death of the author, albeit intellectually exciting, does not adequately contain the varied dynamics of textual production and interpretation. This endeavour will be accomplished by examining the arguments that have been presented by Barthes and later Foucault. In its place, it will argue for a rethinking of the author's position, one that takes into account the inevitability of the authorial context, purpose, and identity being imprinted into the work, while at the same time allowing for the transformational potential of the reader involvement and interpretative flexibility.

1. The Authorial Nip

As a result of the basic criticism that was developed by Roland Barthes and later on by Michel Foucault, it is now clear that the connection between an author and their text is far more complex than a simple binary of presence or absence. The revolutionary essay “The Death of the Author” (1967) penned by Roland Barthes states that in order to free the text, the author must be “killed” in an emblematic sense. This would enable the words to exist independently of the intents of their creator or the biographical context in which they were written. Foucault, on the other hand, complicates this narrative by exploring the “author function” as an inherent part of society’s discourse, suggesting that the author’s identity does indeed play a role in how texts are received and interpreted; yet, in a more abstract and function-oriented manner (Straub, 2021).

On the other hand, this subtle difference from Barthes highlights the fact that the notion of “The Death of the Author” significantly moved the attention towards the role of the reader in producing meaning, fully excluding the author from the equation which underestimates the complexity of the author-text-reader triad. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that the author’s personal, social, and historical background permeates the work, which in turn influences the interpretation of the text as well as the assortment of potential interpretations. Therefore, recognising the author’s impact does not bind the text to a single, unchangeable interpretation; rather, it enhances the process of interpretation by adding a more complete picture of the text’s origins and the possible consequences of those origins. This research paper contends that the reconciliation of these seemingly contradictory theories lies in the acknowledgment of the author’s role not as an authoritarian figure looming over the text but rather as a contextual lens through which texts can be understood and appreciated in a variety of ways. This acknowledgment supports a more nuanced return of the author in literary and cultural criticism (Di Leo, 2016).

It is of the utmost importance to investigate the implications of Barthes and Foucault’s ideas in current literary criticism, particularly in the context of the dynamic interaction that exists between the author, the text, and the reader. In contrast to Foucault’s nuanced position, which does not completely separate the text from its creator but rather sees the author as a function within the larger discourses of society (Stygall, 1994); Barthes advocates for the emancipation of the text from the authorial purpose in order to choose an approach that is centered on the reader. From this vantage point, critics

can see the author not as an irrelevant entity but rather as a key point of reference that adds to the multidimensional interpretation of the text. Therefore, the most important aspect of this discussion is not the elimination of the author but rather the reorganisation of the author's function within the framework of the literary ecosystem. The duality that is offered by "The Death of the Author" and "The Return of the Author" does not always need a decision between completely removing the author from the text or re-establishing the author as the exclusive authority over the text; rather, it encourages a more integrative approach, in which the context, objectives, and identity of the author enhance the reader's engagement with the text. This provides a framework for a more profound comprehension, while still giving abundant leeway for individual interpretation and the creation of meaning. Therefore, instead of viewing the arguments of Barthes and Foucault as being incompatible with one another, it becomes evident that a synthesis of their insights would promote a more nuanced appreciation of texts as entities that are formed by a confluence of authorial influence and reader interpretation (Burke, 2008). This bridge advocates for a balanced acknowledgment of the significance of the author in literary and cultural criticism.

Expanding upon this integrative viewpoint, it is of the utmost importance to look further into how contemporary researchers such as Carla Maria Hilário et al. (2018) who have further clarified the discourse on authorship; this is especially important in the world of scientific writing, where the presence of the author acquires a distinct significance. In their research 'Authorship in Science: A Critical Analysis from a Foucauldian Perspective', Hilário et al., shed light on how, when seen through the lens of Foucault, the notion of authorship in scientific revolutions contains both the erasure of the author and the need of the author. In this passage, the writers argue that while Barthes' concept of "The Death of the Author" allows for a more autonomous interpretation by eliminating the authorial bias, it also minimises the inherent connection that exists between the creator and the created. Even though theoretical frameworks may advocate for the reduction of the author's overt influence on the reader's interpretation, this demonstrates that the undercurrents of the author's expertise, historical context, and societal role are essential in providing the text with its credibility and ensuring its place within the larger discourse. Therefore, the conversation between Barthes and Foucault's theories, which is enriched by contemporary interpretations, brings to light the importance of striking a delicate balance between commemorating the author's passing to give the reader more agency

and recognising the author's return to appreciate the text's rootedness and authenticity (Halperin, 2014).

2. Life After Life (2013)

Within the sphere of the ultramodern literary world, *Life After Life* (2013) by the British novelist Kate Atkinson stands out as an intriguing investigation of the construction of narratives. Through the plaiting of a tapestry of lives that challenges the reader's idea of the text's authority, this story breaks through the customary bounds that had previously been established. Ingeniously, Atkinson explores the concept of the death of the author, via the employment of many narratives and the purposeful blurring of conventional authorial responsibilities. Through *Life After Life*, Atkinson encourages her readers to reevaluate the function of the author in the creative process.

3. The Death of the Author

Life After Life goes beyond the simple implementation of the death of the author notion to investigate the fundamental nature of story formation and the flexibility of authorial identity; this latter is accomplished by building on the underlying principles that have been provided. Not only does Atkinson's use of many narratives provide a challenge to the reader's comprehension of linear storytelling, but it also highlights the precarious nature of authorial control in the face of reader interpretation and the reimagining of tales. As Peter Lamarque (1990) argues, the vitality of a text does not lie in its origin but rather in its reception. Indeed, this is a concept that Atkinson's novel embodies through its intricate narrative structure, in which each narrative retelling of Ursula's life offers a new "text" up for interpretation, and there is no single, authoritative narrative voice. Taking this method not only recalls Julia Kristeva's argument that the text is a multi-dimensional place that is produced by the confluence of multiple texts (Hamza Reguig-Mouro, 2020) but also demonstrates how the interaction of these narratives may lead to a kaleidoscopic variety of interpretations, each of which is influenced by the reader's subjective lens. Through this, Atkinson does not only negotiate the notion of the death of the author; she vivifies it, offering a narrative universe where the conventional roles of authors, text, and reader combine and change, therefore honouring the subjective and collaborative character of storytelling.

Building on this deep narrative basis, the subtleties of Atkinson's method in *Life After Life* further dive into the nuances of authorial identity and its breakdown inside the fabric of storytelling. Dan Shen's "Dual Narrative

Progression as Dual Authorial Communication: Extending the Rhetorical Model” (2018) stresses the blurring borders between the Implied Author and the Real Author, indicating that the differentiation rests in the functions each performs within the narrative process. Atkinson’s strategy of utilising many storylines not only serves as a vehicle for exploring the multitudinous possibilities of Ursula’s existence but also successfully dismantles the conventional order of authorial control. By continually altering viewpoints and results, Atkinson relinquishes the solitary authorial power, instead embracing a position that more closely resembles a curator of possibilities than a dictator of outcomes; this intentional narrative decision not only confirms the notion of the death of the author by decentralising the author’s position but also underlines the subjective nature of storytelling, as each iteration of Ursula’s existence becomes a joint production between Atkinson and her readers. Through this concerted interaction, the story surpasses classical narrative limitations, revealing how the relationships between the three pillars author, the text, and the reader may grow into a co-authored study of narrative possibilities.

4. The Author-function

By way of its narrative innovation, *Life After Life* provides a detailed illustration of how the Foucauldian author functions; it is especially evident in the way it depicts Ursula Todd’s various incarnations. Ursula’s identities are not presented by Atkinson as being stable or innate; rather, they are presented as narratives that are produced via the settings and contexts of her different incarnations. There are several iterations of Ursula’s life, each of which is a story in its own right; these iterations are characterized by unique experiences, decisions, and consequences that, when combined, create a complex identity. This method reflects Foucault’s (1977) contention that the author is not a solitary source of creation but rather a role through which a variety of discourses are channeled and realized. It is possible to see Atkinson’s use of the author function as an investigation into the fluidity of identity; i.e., Foucault does not view identity as a solitary, unchanging essence; rather, he views it as something that is perpetually altered by the narratives that we act out and those that are forced upon us. Instead of demonstrating how our conception of identity is inextricably linked to the tales we live and talk about ourselves, the multitude of experiences that Ursula has had across her lifetimes contradicts the concept of a unified person. Therefore, the narrative strategy that Atkinson employs serves as a compelling illustration of the Foucauldian concept. This is because it showcases the role that narrative

plays in the construction of the self, depicting the fact that identity is not a pre-given entity but rather a result of the interaction between individual agency and the narratives that surround our existence.

Furthermore, it is apparent that Atkinson's *Life After Life* not only exemplifies the Foucauldian author function but also investigates the impact that social narratives have in the process of self-construction. In each of her rebirths, Ursula Todd provides a fresh perspective from which to investigate how historical, cultural, and social circumstances contribute to the formation of an individual's particular identity. For instance, in one of her incarnations, Ursula is in London during World War II and experiences the Blitz; she has to navigate the traumas and upheavals of that age, which unavoidably shaped her into a different person than she was in her other lives, which took place in more tranquil environments. This diversity highlights Foucault's theory that the author-function goes beyond the person, embracing the various discourses that permeate society and impact on the individual's self-conception (Foucault, 1977). By portraying Ursula's lives as distinct tales, each shaped by different historical and social conditions, Atkinson highlights how our identities are not exclusively self-written but are also profoundly authored by the eras and societies we inhabit. This multimodal representation of Ursula's identity over many periods not only illustrates the complicated interaction between human agency and society narratives but also underscores the fluid and created the character of identity itself. Employing this, Atkinson expertly exploits the story as a medium to investigate Foucault's theory that the self is a narrative construct, perpetually created and recast in the junction of private trials and social records.

Conclusion

This article has navigated through the complex terrain of authorship, authorial intent, and textual interpretation, to find a middle ground that reconciles the theoretical provocations of 'The Death of the Author' with the undeniable imprint of the creator's identity on their work. It has been written in light of the intricate discourse that has been fostered by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. An important realization is brought to light as a result of the trip through these arguments: the binary opposition between the presence and absence of the author is a reductionist view of the intricate connections that occur within the literary ecosystem. We arrive at a rethought notion of authorship that enhances the reading experience without decreasing the reader's agency by investigating the multidimensional function of the author

as both a contextual influence and a character whose death prepares the way for interpretative freedom. This allows us to arrive at a more complete understanding of authorship. In this perspective, the death of the author does not signify an end, but rather a transformational beginning for greater engagement and study. The author should not be seen as a tyrant of meaning but rather as a partner in the ever-evolving story of textual criticism.

Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* ranks as a major accomplishment in British present-day literature, not just for its complicated narrative design but also for its deep investigation of the kinship between author, text, and reader. Atkinson plunges into the complicated arena of narrative structure, defying traditional concepts of linear storytelling and authorial sovereignty, through the creation of a universe of narrative possibilities, where each iteration of Ursula's life allows a fresh investigation of themes and interpretations, thereby embodying the concept of the death of the author while rejuvenating it at the same time. This novel, nevertheless, goes beyond the simple deed of storytelling to develop into a shared realm of narrative production, where the wall that separates the author and the reader melts, enabling a joint interaction that amends the narrative experience. On the other hand, *Life After Life* exploits the realm of Foucault's 'author function,' asking readers to reconceptualize the concept of selfhood outside the limitations of linear time and intrinsic essence. In a nutshell, in the vestige of Ursula Todd's multitudinous lives, readers can unearth a mirror reflecting the numerous universes of their own identities, always changing through the stories they survive and those they heard about, marking *Life After Life* as a groundbreaking piece in the study of narrative's altering sway on the self.

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Abstract

Within the realm of literary theory, approaches to the issue of authorship have swung like a pendulum; however, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault emerge as influential figures with their respective theories that challenge the prevailing opinion viewing the author as the ultimate arbiter of meaning and emphasize the importance of evaluating texts on their own merits. In this regard, this endeavour examines these arguments within Kate Atkinson's masterful novel "Life After Life" (2013), which offers unique narrative experimentation and unveils multiple layers of reality, questioning conventional conceptions of authorial intent and interpretive authority.

Keywords

Author, The Death of the Author, Author-function, Kate Atkinson, Life After Life

مستخلص

في مجال النظرية الأدبية، بدأت مناهج مسألة التأليف تتأرجح مثل البندول؛ ومع ذلك، ظهر رولاند بارت وميشيل فوكو كشخصيات مؤثرة بنظريتهما التي تلقي بظلالهن الشك على الرأي السائد الذي ينظر إلى المؤلف على أنه الحكم النهائي للمعنى ويؤكد على أهمية تقييم النصوص بناءً على مزاياها الخاصة. في هذا الصدد، يبحث هذا المسعى في هذه الحجج

ضمن رواية كيت أتكينسون الأعجوبة الحياة بعد الحياة (2013) والتي تقدم تجربة سردية فريدة وتكشف طبقات متعددة من الواقع تشكك في المفاهيم التقليدية لنية المؤلف والسلطة التفسيرية

كلمات مفتاحية

المؤلف، موت المؤلف، الوظيفة، كيت أتكينسون، الحياة بعد الحياة

Résumé

Dans l'arène de la théorie littéraire, les approches de la question de l'auctorialité ont oscillé comme un pendule; cependant, Roland Barthes et Michel Foucault émergent en tant que figures influentes avec leurs théories respectives qui remettent en question l'opinion dominante selon laquelle l'auteur est le dernier arbitre du sens et soulignent l'importance d'évaluer les textes pour leurs propres mérites. À cet égard, cette étude examine ces arguments dans le roman magistral de Kate Atkinson, *Life After Life* (2013), qui offre une expérimentation narrative unique et dévoile plusieurs couches de réalité, remettant en question les conceptions conventionnelles de l'intention de l'auteur et de l'autorité interprétative.

Mots-clés

Auteur, la mort de l'auteur, la fonction auteur, Kate Atkinson, *Life After Life*