

The Resurrection of the Author in Joan Didion's *Democracy*

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Abstract

In the face of numerous attempts to demolish the authority of the author in interpreting literary texts, Joan Didion asserts the inevitable role of the author in her short novel *Democracy* (1984). This paper explores Didion's attempts to resurrect the image of the author in her novel. She tacitly employs her fictional text as a platform to discuss her critical and theoretical opinions concerning the role of the author in literature. This study aims at presenting Didion as a creative metacritic who uses her fiction to deal with one of the most controversial arguments that preoccupied critics, writers, and readers surrounding the date of the publication of her novel. Although this study depends heavily on Roland Barthes's article "The Death of the Author" (2001), it also relies on some of the critics who reject authorial intentions in literary texts.

Keywords: Author, Didion, Barthes, Metacriticism, Metafiction

Introduction

The twentieth century marks a state of rebellion against different forms of authority in the writings of many writers and philosophers. Apparently, the horrific consequences of the two World Wars created a feeling of suspicion towards authoritative figures and institutions that often promised individuals to bring salvation to humanity but failed to deliver. One of the voices that rejected the authority of the writer in literature was Roland Barthes (2001) in his declaration of the death of the author in an article he published titled “ The Death of the Author” as an attempt to limit the influence of the creator of the text in his or her art. As a reaction to the rebellious attitude towards the presence of the author in his or her work, some writers have shown their resentment and refusal to give away their legitimate right in being an essential part of their literary product. Joan Didion’s intriguing novel, *Democracy*, is an exemplar of this reaction towards the voices determined to exclude the author from his or her literary work.

In her novel, Didion, an American journalist and fiction writer, blazons out the author’s endeavors to resurrect her role in the events of her narrative. Didion emerges as an outstanding example of a creative metacritic who, in her metafictional text, responds to and challenges one of the main principles of New Criticism, Structuralism, and Poststructuralism which all resort to the rejection of the author in the interpretive process. To use Italo Calvino’s (1986) locution from *The Uses of Literature*, Didion can be considered a “philosopher-writer”(p.39) who discusses the position and role of authors and readers.

Metafiction and metacriticism are not new forms in literary history; however, they have become prominent trends in the postmodern era, as they have become more developed and sophisticated. According to Suresh Ravel (1981)in *Metacriticism*, “metacritics” are scholarly critics who “engage in philosophical analysis of the problems of criticism and critical theory” (p. 239) through nonfiction. They are critics who critique criticism. But what we intend to explore and examine here is a creative writer who takes the role of the metacritic, and uses her fictional text as a place to express her ideas about literary theory and critical approaches, responding to and critiquing literary critics. Without doubt, the most suitable and flexible genre that allows this kind of interaction between the author, text, and reader is the metafictional novel. According to Patricia Waugh (1988) in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, metafiction is fiction which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and realism (p. 2).

Apparently, what gives the creative metacritic credence is that writers, such as Didion, master both the skill to create stories and possess a profound understanding of the literary theories and disciplines used in their fiction. This creative metacritic’s contribution to literary criticism is significant because he or she has the freedom of movement, the capability to experience both fields, literature, and criticism, and expose to the reader’s weaknesses and strengths of literary theory. The creative writer-critic according to David Lodge (1990) in “Crosscurrents in Modern English Criticism,” “is less disinterested than the academic, more concerned to work out in the practice of criticism the aesthetic principles of his own art, and to create a climate of taste and opinion favorable to the reception of that art. He writes in the first place for fellow-artists, but as there are never very many of these he has to draw on wider audience, either the academic one, or the ‘general reader’” (p. 247).

This inquiry is in two folds. The essay aims at presenting a critique of Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" by pointing out some gaps that depict contradictions in his discussion. In the second part of this paper, we will attempt to explore Joan Didion's *Democracy* and show how her novel functions as a metacritical text as it argues against Barthes's perception of the role of the author in literary texts. This study examines the reciprocal relationship between the writer, the novel, and the reader. Didion manifests her theoretical understanding of this relationship through her recurrent involvement of the author and the reader throughout the course of the novel. Through our examination of the *Democracy*, we attempt to arrive at the conclusion that Didion insists on the author being a fundamental pole of the writing and interpretive processes.

1. The Death of the Author

The idea of the death of the author has been out there in the critical and theoretical circles long since the announcement of the "Death of God" by Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century. The majority of twentieth century literary critics have written the author's obituary and did not recognize him or her in the reading process. Mainstream critical schools such as New Criticism, Structuralism, and Poststructuralism fundamentally denied the presence of the author in literary texts and strongly rejected the author as part of the interpretive process. W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, two of the pivotal critical practitioners of New Criticism, renounced any connection between the literary text and its author. In an essay written in collaboration between Wimsatt and Beardsley, they assert that any understanding or interpretation of a text depending on the author's stated or implied intention or private meaning would be considered a fallacy. In "The Intentional Fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley (1989) contend that

The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge. What is said about the poem is subject to the same scrutiny as any statement in linguistics or in the general science of psychology. (p.5)

According to New Critics, a literary text is a separate entity that exists independent of the author. The authorial intention is not synonymous with the meaning of the text.

Foucault (2001) in "What is an Author" believes that a literary text introduces and creates itself merely on the grounds of an interrelated field of discourse and

"that the task of criticism is not to reestablish the ties between an author and his work or to reconstitute an author's thought and experience through his works and, further, that criticism should concern itself with the structures of a work, its architectonic forms, which are studied for their intrinsic and internal relationships (p. 1624).

In "The Death of the Author", Barthes (2001) declares a very dangerous statement that alters our understanding of literature in modern age. He boldly, and perhaps irrationally, eliminates one major participant in the process of writing. By announcing the death of the author, Barthes not only revolts against the creator of the literary text, but he also creates a state of chaos in modern

criticism. In fact, he creates a great gap that if not filled with an equally influential element as the creator of the work, literary texts would suffer the abusive attacks of various, and numerous, irresponsible interpretations. The authority of the author is intended to keep order. If Barthes believes that the author is a tyrant element in the process of writing, he definitely does not solve the problem by burying the creator of the work. In fact, Barthes only substitutes one tyrant with others. First, he replaces the author with the scripter; in other words, he only changes names without providing real solutions, or resolving any existing problems. And second, Barthes extends the authority of the reader by giving him or her the right to inherit the text. Therefore, the reader would be a new owner of the text; a new author. I believe that Barthes commits an unforgivable mistake when he exaggerates the omniscience of the reader, or listener, by giving him or her an absolute capability of understanding every utterance and event that take place in the text. Barthes (2001) asserts that

“ there is, however, someone who understands each word in its duplicity and who, in addition, hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him- this someone being precisely the reader(or here, the listener)” (p. 1469).

This generalized statement implies that reaching a final understanding of a literary text is possible. Although modern criticism proves that it is not possible to reach a final understanding of the text, I do not wish to discuss this point here. I am in fact interested in revealing Barthes contradicting himself in this essay.

Earlier in the essay, Barthes contends that “[to] give the text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (2001, p.1469). The reader could easily sense that Barthes does not want to kill the text and wants it to remain futile. But Barthes does not seem to defend the text from the reader’s attempts to impose limits on it. If we are to agree that the reader is capable of understanding every single word in the text, then we ought to admit that we must “close the reading”, to use Barthes’s rhetoric. And we do not believe that Barthes and other critics truly intend to put an end to reading activity a final interpretation.

Ironically, when Barthes’ lists the various factors responsible for bringing the text into existence, he deliberately denies the author as an influence on this particular text. It is true that “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation” (2001, p.1469). But is not the author one factor in the writing process, and is not his or her background considered an important culture that should be taken into account while reading? So why cannot the author be another one factor, and not necessarily a dominant one, in the process of interpretation.

Again, Barthes shows his contradictory argument when he uses the image of the father – child. By using a simile, Barthes compares the author to a father and the text to a child. He explains that the role of the author ends at the moment that the text is created exactly as the role of the father ends at the moment that the child is born. Either Barthes is delusional when he believes that the influence of the father is denied in the child after he is born, or he simply ignores the effect of the figure of speech he is using in his essay. We are all aware of the fact that a child cannot be separated from the image of the father even after the latter’s death. The child will always be compared to the father, whether physically or intellectually, and will also carry his or her father’s name and genes forever.

Apparently, Barthes's radical attacks on the authority of the writer triggered an attitude of defiance targeted from some contemporary writers. In the following section, we intend to present Joan Didion as a creative metacritic who uses her novel as a metacritical text to write back to recurrent attempts to "murder" the author. One cannot possibly ignore Didion's intriguing narrative technique in her *Democracy*. She aptly manages to resurrect the inevitable role of the author in the literary text, waging by that a bold attack on Roland Barthes's announcement of the death of the author.

2. The Author Resurrected in *Democracy*

Didion's *Democracy* presents a different perspective of the role of the author than presented by New critics, Structuralists, and Poststructuralists. Apparently, Didion is quite aware of the mainstream critics' general notion of the position of the author in his or her literary text. Through her compelling treatment of the narrative point of view in *Democracy*, Didion vigorously encourages her readers to consider the author as an integral part of her narrative. Didion's style in writing *Democracy* simulates her journalistic writing as her non-fictional "essays are montages or mosaics representing her not-quite-completed thoughts," (Houston and Lombardi, 2009, 7). In *Democracy*, her images, plots, setting, and characters, are fragmented. Her narrative form is a mosaic of poems, discussion of writers and their literary works, politics, and description of nature. She uses her novel to covertly and overtly discuss one main trend in literary theory; the death of the author. Didion "breaks the frame" of her novel, as Brian McHale (2004) puts it in *Postmodernist Fiction*, in order to "foreground her own superior reality" and "the supposedly absolute reality of the author becomes just another level of fiction" (p.197).

Soon enough, in Chapter Two, Didion is straightforward in her request to be considered the writer of her own text. In fact, she strongly blazons out her role in the process of writing as the creator of her text and refuses to be replaced by the reader. Didion clearly says:

Call me the author. Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion, upon whose character and doings much will depend of what interests these pages may have, as she sits at her writing table in her own room in her own house on Welbeck Street (p.16).

By this announcement at the very beginning of the novel, Didion reveals her objection to Barthes's idea of dismissing the author from literary texts and replacing him or her with the reader. Without doubt, Didion is aware of the long argument of the theoretical challenge of authorship; the death and disappearance of the author in his or her text. Therefore, she establishes the idea of the resurrection of the author in the postmodern era. She wittingly alludes to the Phoenix, which is a symbol of rebirth, when she uses lines from Wallace Stevens "Of Mere Being." Didion explains that it is her intention to use these lines to start her novel.

I have no unequivocal way of beginning it, although I do have certain things in mind. I have for example these lines from a poem by Wallace Stevens:

*The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance,
A gold feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song (p.16).*

This quote is of great significance to our understanding of the Didion's idea of the return of the creator of the text. The allusion of the Phoenix is not arbitrary nor accidental. In ancient mythology, the Phoenix is a legendary bird that dies and renews its birth; "from its ashes the new phoenix arises" (Broek, 2015: 146). Didion's allusion of the Phoenix appears after her demand that she should be called the author. She announces her return as the owner of her narrative as the "gold-feathered bird" rises from its own ashes; young and strong.

Didion, toys with her narrative style as she overtly explains the authorial intention about the way she intends to begin the novel. In a detailed description, she informs the reader about the way she is going to present her narrative and the way she wants her readers to consider reading her novel. The instructions on how to read her novel are conveyed through the review of one of her students about her book who says:

Didion begins with a rather ironic reference to her immediate reason to write this piece. Try using this ploy as the opening of an essay; you may want to copy the ironic- but-earnest tone of Didion, or you might try making your essay witty. Consider the broader question of the effect of setting: how does Didion use the scene as a rhetorical base? Consider, too, Didion's own involvement in the setting: an atmosphere results. (p.17)

Her request to be treated as the creator of her novel is presented in a clear and straightforward manner. It seems that she defiantly addresses Foucault who, in "What is an Author," claims that readers usually misunderstand the function of the first person pronoun "I" in a narrative. Foucault (2001) says:

It is well known that in a novel narrated in the first person, neither the first person pronoun, the present indicative tense, nor, for that matter, its sign of localization refer directly to the writer, either to the time when he wrote, or to the specific act of writing; rather, they stand for a "second self whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book. It would be as false to seek the author in relation to the actual writer as to the fictional narrator; the "author-function" arises out of their scission—in the division and distance of the two (p.1631).

The fact that Didion wants to be called "the author" is a clear statement that Joan Didion is the author of *Democracy*. It is a loud call by the creative writer against the recurrent abuses of the critics and professional readers to abstain from interfering in the writer's text. She is like one of her main characters, Jack Lovett, "intolerant of the accidental" (p.36). It could be insinuated that what the writer writes is intentional. Characters, places, ideas, and emotions are put there in the text for a reason. Throughout the novel, Didion explains her methods of constructing her narrative and introducing her character. Part One Chapter Six begins with the author/ teller of the story by saying "Let me establish Enez Victor" (46). Katherine Usher Henderson in *American Women Writing Fiction* says:

It is Didion who portrays for us the losses and trials of Inez's life, sometimes telling us the source of her information, sometimes slipping into the role of the omniscient narrator (p. 79).

In Chapter 11 of the same Part, Didion lectures in front of her students on how writers write and that their style reflects their thoughts. In these lectures at Berkley, Didion emphasizes the role of post-industrial writers in their literary works. Didion says:

I spent my classroom time pointing out similarities in style, and presumably in ideas of democracy (the hypothesis being that the way reflected a writer constructed a sentence reflected the way that a writer thought,) between George Orwell and Earnest Hemingway, Henry Adams and Norman Mailer. “The hills opposite us were grey and wrinkled like the skins of elephants” and “this war was a racket like all other wars” were both George Orwell, but were also an echo of Ernest Hemingway. (p. 71)

One can insinuate that Didion’s reference to the hills and white elephants in George Orwell’s and Ernest Hemingway’s works is of great significance, because of the difficulty that these two writers create in their texts. First, it is quite difficult to make sense of Orwell’s “Shooting the Elephant” unless the reader is familiar with the writer’s political and post-colonial views. And second, we do not think that the reader will be able to find any sense in “Hills Like White Elephants” unless Hemingway himself reveals his message in the story, or by knowing his professional background as a journalist in Spain during the Spanish civil war. Therefore, it is necessary to get acquainted with these authors’ intellectual, professional and social background to have a better understanding of their literary product. Apparently, Didion strongly believes that it is quite impossible to separate the author from his or her text. She certainly does not hesitate to tell her reader to “consider the role of the writer in a post-industrial society” (p.72) and also asks to consider her “own involvement in the setting” (p.72) of her novel. Perhaps, that is why Didion, the narrator and the author, urges the reader, and her audience, to “consider the political implications of both the reliance on and the distrust of abstract words. Consider the social organization implicit in the use of the autobiographical third person” (p.72).

Joan Didion’s playfulness with fragments of poems from A.E. Housman, T.S. Eliot, and Delmore Schwartz could be seen as a deliberate provocation as she toys with lines taken from poems written by mainstream poets. It seems that Didion is sending a message to critics that writers will not approve others to mess with their texts. When she apologizes for combining several lines from different poems, she addresses these writers directly calling them by their names. She does not address the speakers in these poems, instead she apologizes to the authors, the creators of these poems. Without doubt, the reference to Eliot is not accidental. Eliot is a prominent progenitor of New Criticism who believes in the author’s detachment from the character’s emotions. Charles Bressler (2007) in *Literary Criticism* says:

According to Eliot, the only way of expressing emotion through art is by finding an objective correlative, or a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events, or reactions that can effectively awaken in the reader the emotional response the author desires without being a direct statement of that emotion (p.58).

In several instances, Joan Didion literally casts herself as an actual person in her narrative. In more than one instance, we find some similarities between Didion, the author of the novel, and the persona of Didion, who demands to be considered as the author of the novel. Joan Didion the

American novelist and essayist who worked at Vogue from 1956 to 1963, is introduced in *Democracy* as the American novelist and essayist who worked with Inez Victor, one of the heroines of the novel, at Vogue in 1960. Didion's involvement in her own narrative is more than a figment of literary imagination as Michael Greaney claims in *Contemporary Fiction and the Uses of Theory*:

to reinvent the author as a fictional character is not necessarily the best way of proving that s/he is robustly alive: the author-as-character conceit could equally suggest that writers have always been simply figments of the literary imagination, that the author has always been nothing more than a plausible front man for the quite impersonal operations of textuality (p.59.)

Didion, the character/ narrator in *Democracy*, asserts herself as an active persona of the author who is aware of her intentions and actions. Her interaction with the characters "is characterized by a deliberate and explicit autobiographical and memoirist approach" (Bakhtin, 1981, p.27.)

Conclusion

It is cardinal to understand that Didion's attempt to reinforce her presence in her narrative is not intended to create a real text nor an autobiography. Her *Democracy* remains a fictional narrative with fictional characters and plots. Didion, like the rest of the people in real life, can create untrue stories. The fact that the characters, plots, and settings, of her narrative are fictional or factual is not our concern here in this paper. Our empirical concern is that Didion wants her readers to consider her role in the novel and recognize her influence on our understanding of her characters and themes.

To conclude our essay, we would like to contend that we do not completely disagree with Barthes' attitude towards the presence of the author in the text. The writer is not the only element in the process of writing but excluding the influence of the creator of the work from his or her text would weaken our understanding of the author's intention and alter our understanding of the work. After all, does not the text exist only because there is an author who needs to convey a certain message, feeling or experience? Why should the birth of the reader "be at the cost of the death of the author"?

The question worth considering is "does it make a difference to the reader if he or she knows that Didion is a journalist and that there are some traces of her life present in the novel?" We would say that knowing Didion's professional background does not influence our understanding of her narrative, but it would definitely affect and, perhaps, alter our perception of the authorial intention. Without doubt, every author wants to deliver a message or an idea in his or her work. At the same time, it is not the reader's task to reach a truthful message in these words because asserting an absolute truth will be quite impossible in fiction.

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