

Death as a Metaphor: Friedrich Nietzsche, Roland Barthes and Alvin Kernan^(*)

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Abstract

This paper explores the interconnections between Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Roland Barthes (1915-1980), and Alvin Kernan (1923-2018) regarding the metaphor of death. Although the death of God, the death of the author, and the death of literature may seem disparate concepts, they are actually very closely related. They move in a linear trajectory that seems to be chronological. Madness, and perhaps insight, may be underlying the thoughts of these three critical thinkers. This is what is uncovered through analyses of their relevant texts: various works by Nietzsche, "The Death of the Author" (1968) by Barthes and *The Death of Literature* (1990) by Kernan. The death of God foreshadows the death of the author as the former overthrows the Absolute Author with all His Authority in the universe, paving the way for overthrowing the authority of the author over his literary text. Both the death of God and the death of the author are the deconstructive backdrops of the death of literature at the hands of post-modernism, mass media and mass culture.

Keywords: death of God, death of the author, death of literature, Friedrich Nietzsche, Roland Barthes, Alvin Kernan

الملخص

تستكشف هذه الورقة البحثية الترابط بين فريدريك نيتشه (١٨٤٤-١٩٠٠)، ورولان بارت (١٩١٥-١٩٨٠)، وألفن كيرنان (١٩٢٣-٢٠١٨) فيما يتعلق باستعارة الموت. فكل من هؤلاء المفكرين الثلاثة استخدم استعارة الموت في أعماله للدلالة على معانٍ خاصة. على الرغم من أن موت الرب، وموت المؤلف، وموت الأدب قد تبدو مفاهيم منفصلة، إلا أنها في الواقع مرتبطة ارتباطاً وثيقاً. فهي تتحرك في مسار خطي يبدو أنه ترتيب زمني. قد يكون الجنون، وربما البصيرة، أساس أفكار هؤلاء المفكرين الثلاثة. هذا ما يتم الكشف عنه من خلال تحليل

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نصوصهم ذات الصلة: أعمال مختلفة لنيتشه، "موت المؤلف" (1968) لبارت، وموت الأدب (1990) لكيرنان. إن موت الرب ينذر بموت المؤلف فكما أطاح نيتشه بالمؤلف المطلق بكل سلطته في الكون، مهد ذلك الطريق للإطاحة بسلطة المؤلف على نصه الأدبي. إن كل من موت الرب وموت المؤلف يمثلان الخلفية التفكيكية لموت الأدب على أيدي كل من ما بعد الحداثة ووسائل الإعلام والثقافة الجماهيرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: موت الرب، موت المؤلف، موت الأدب، فريدريك نيتشه، رولان

بارت، ألفن كيرنان.

This paper explores the interconnections between Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Roland Barthes (1915-1980), and Alvin Kernan (1923-2018) regarding the metaphor of death. Although the death of God, the death of the author, and the death of literature may seem disparate concepts, they are actually very closely related. They move in a linear trajectory that seems to be chronological. Madness, and perhaps insight, may be underlying the thoughts of these three critical thinkers.

Harold Bloom defines metaphor as a figure of speech that convinces people of something that is both interesting and not true (2009, p. xi). The metaphor of death reveals the concept of demise to make it approachable to minds in an aesthetic way, and to build an image that is originally not true. For example, denying the existence of God implies that He originally does not exist; however, declaring His death indicates that He has a period of life that comes to an end, and this is not true. Mainly, it is a metaphor to finalize God's life with the advent of the Overman.

Historically speaking, Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God paves the way for Barthes' declaration of the death of the author and Kernan's conception of the death of literature. The death of God is a metaphor because death is associated with a living Being, but Nietzsche denies the existence of God; he believes that there is essentially no God. Then, how can a nonexistent being die? In Nietzsche, Barthes and Kernan, death has a special meaning. This is why death is a metaphor in each case; it does not have a literal meaning. In Nietzsche, it refers to the end of Truth as a metaphysical concept and the birth of the Overman. In

Barthes, it means the birth of the reader. In Kernan, death means the end of the Romantic and Modern conception of literature. One of the meanings of the word *author* is God. Therefore, Barthes' claim of the death of the author echoes Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God.

Death of God

Gigantomachy is an old story made new. It is the battle between gods and giants, in other words, between Plato who represents belief in metaphysics or idealism and Nietzsche who stands for materialism (Armitage, 2017, p. 1). Nietzsche contends that such metaphysical concepts as intelligibility, meaning, being and truth are merely fictions (Armitage, 2017, p. 2). Nietzsche believes that truth, being and God are equivalents as conceptions (Armitage, 2017, p. 25). Nietzsche cannot explain such concepts as truth, virtue or justice simply because these are immaterial conceptions. His materialism falls short of such an explanation (Armitage, 2017, pp. 2-3). As a born atheist, Nietzsche rejects all transcendentalist truths represented by God as the inherent pestilence haunting mankind, in a tendency that coincides with modern science's denial of God (Armitage, 2017, p. 3). Armitage argues that if "truth" is denied, Nietzsche cannot claim that his philosophy is "true" (2017, p.6). As a consequence, relativism and subjectivism resurface to impact all aspects of life, and literature in this case is foregrounded. This relativistic approach is reflected in Barthes' "death of the author" that opens the gates wide for unlimited subjective meanings for any literary text in the postmodern era.

As an anti-metaphysician concentrating on the being question, Nietzsche tries to subvert the bases of intelligibility, that is to say, being and truth, utilizing the will to power. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche states, "*This world is the will to power—and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power – and nothing besides*" (Emphasis in the original; 1968, p. 550). His philosophy about metaphysics emanates from two positions: modern science and the death of God (Armitage, 2017, pp. 9-11). While he criticizes modern science for complicity with theism, modern science is considered responsible for the notion of the death of God (Armitage, 2017, p. 10). It is true that modern

atheism denies the truth of God, but it maintains the truth of science, which means that it still believes in truth. This belief in truth negates the very atheism of Nietzsche. Murdering God, modern science actually slaughters itself as it annihilates the pursuit of truth and reason (Armitage, 2017, p. 12).

The appearance of Darwinism makes belief in God ridiculous owing to the fact that there is no longer need for God to guide man to his origin (Armitage, 2017, p. 12). Correspondingly, there is no longer need for an author as an origin, according to Barthes, to provide the reader with an interpretation of a text. The subjectivism and relativism enveloping Nietzschean philosophy have their resonance in Barthes' "death of the author". Thus, the death of God is inextricably linked to the death of the author. Darwinian reductionism of God to a simple belief that is not true paves the way for Nietzsche to claim that truth is not true. Consequently, truth becomes utter fantasy; it is only a means of survival; it is the "ultimate lie" that humans use to adapt to life on earth. People deceive themselves with the concept of truth mistaking it for power (Armitage, 2017, p. 13).

In this fictitious context, there is no stable reality or being that reason seeks to account for. Even, reason itself that is used to reach truth is false (Armitage, 2017, p. 14). Thus, human life is supported by a number of lies or by "untruth" (Nietzsche, 1986/2002, p. 7). The denial of God is a denial of truth, and the denial of both is the upright repercussion of the Western modern sciences. Nietzsche's *subjectivist* and *relativist* views make the *subject* "the author of truth" (Armitage, 2017, p. 36). This fact reinforces Barthes's vantage point when he claims that each reader is the author of truth concerning the literary text.

Moreover, in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche stresses the plurality of truths which indicates that there is no single truth, namely "there is no truth" (1968, p. 291). All are points of view; Nietzsche himself is aware that his philosophy is another point of view (Armitage, 2017, p. 19). Hence, Barthes' declaration of the death of the author leads to the plurality of readings as there is no gravity to stabilize readings or limit them; there is no single reading; there are numberless interpretations. Nietzsche is as postmodernist as Barthes in spite of the distance of time

between them since both adopt relativism in their approach to truth.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (1887/1989) claims that God as Truth or Divine Truth is the “*longest lie*” of humanity as represented by the Christian belief, Platonism, theism, intelligibility or metaphysics, which throws shadows of doubt on the conception of truth itself (Emphasis in the original; p. 152). Likewise, it can be argued that if “truth” is rejected as a lie, Nietzsche’s philosophy can also be rejected as a lie because it is not “true.” Indeed, his philosophy slaughters itself in its cradle as it backfires when it states that truth is false and fictitious. His declaration of the death of God can also be deemed false and fictitious, i.e. a mere manifestation of the will to power, not the will to truth (Armitage, 2017, p. 15). Even, scientific truth is fictitious, for science only attempts to control nature by depicting it in a better way; therefore, it is again a will to power and not a will to truth (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 172).

With Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God, such absolutes as God, truth and morality are demolished, and nihilism emerges instead to make belief in God implausible (Armitage, 2017, p 26). Death of God corresponds to death of the producer, the craftsman or the artist – death of the author. As Nietzsche’s philosophy is dubbed atheism, Barthes’ thought can be called *literary atheism* or denial of the artist with all expected consequences of having no center to revolve around. The freedom that is granted by the denial of an ultimate being is similar to the freedom the reader is endowed by the death of the author.

Barthes is greatly influenced by Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of structure. Every structure has a center according to traditional philosophy. If the literary work is considered a structure, the author is its conventional center. He is the fountain from which all meanings spring. As the God of the universe is toppled down by Nietzsche, the God/author of the literary text is dethroned by Barthes. God is no longer the source of meaning in His universe as the author is no longer the origin of meaning in his literary work (Allen, 2004, pp. 67-68). Indeed, there is no longer a center in the universe, nor in the literary text to settle the process of signification.

The author should be decentralized owing to his unpindownability. He is nothing more than a transcendental signified that turns into another signifier. The word author may refer to the author's intentions, feelings, passions, culture, unconscious, historical or social background. Which of these aspects is the author? It cannot be pinned down (Allen, 2004, pp. 69-70). By the same token, God is a transcendental signified that turns into endless signifiers. The word God can refer to:

First Cause, Prime Mover, Yahweh, Trinity, Allah, the Tetragrammaton, Spirit, Father, the One, Essence, Knowledge, the Eye that Sees, the Hand that Moves, Love, Vengeance, Forgiveness, the Son, the Mother, the Child, Eternity, Law, the Maker, The Great Architect, Justice and so on. (Allen, 2004, p. 70)

Therefore, in both cases the Author of the universe and the author of the literary work, the existence of a transcendental signified is negated, to demolish in its way all centers that may be used to stabilize meaning (Allen, 2004, p. 70). Since there is no center towards which meanings gravitate, the reader turns into an author who imparts upon the text, through his creative power, new readings, never even thought by the original author (Allen, 2004, p. 73). Barthes criticizes the traditional tendency that the author is the nucleus around which all meanings revolve, taking into account the metaphoricity of the literary text that betrays readings not expected by the author himself, and the split self of the author into conscious and unconscious that betrays instability of meanings (Allen, 2004, p. 73).

The metaphor of death is succinctly stated by Barthes as he explains the relationship between the author, God and father in the patriarchal occidental mentality. These three concepts stand out as transcendental signifieds whose death liberates not only the literary text from the clasp of the author, but also people from theism and the society from any patriarchal hegemony. To extend the metaphor further, the author comes before the text; God comes before the universe; the father comes before the son (Allen, 2004, p. 74). All these come to an end with Nietzsche and Barthes. Michel Foucault expounds, in his essay "What is

an Author?", that the existence of the author curbs the plurality of interpretations and halts the free play of signs (1979, p. 159). Barthes' claim of the multiplicity of truth in "The Death of the Author" coincides with Nietzsche's declaration of the death of Divine Truth. In both cases, it is made clear that there is no single Truth; all truths have become indefensible (Allen, 2004, p. 74).

Nietzsche declared the death of God as early as 1882 (Anderson, 2016, p. 73). The main offshoots of this declaration are the celebration of nihilism and disparagement of metaphysics (Anderson, 2016, pp. 59-60). Mark Anderson differentiates between "metaphysical nihilism" i.e. rejection of Divine Truth and "psychological nihilism" i.e. the mood of melancholy and futility that accompanies the former type of nihilism (2016, pp. 60-61). In this hollow universe, teleology is negated (Anderson, 2016, p. 61). Not only the destination is denied, but also the origin is refused. The undercurrent that underlies Nietzsche's nihilism paves the way for deconstructive nihilism later in the twentieth century as manifested in Barthes' death of the author and later death of literature. The death of God and its consequent nihilism result in a free "powerful man" (Anderson, 2016, p. 62). Likewise, the death of the author leads to a powerful creative reader. If God is no longer the origin of the universe as the author is no more the source of signification, no value remains for humans and readers respectively. What actually remain are the pleasure of the text, free play of the signs, joy and repose, which are the main pleasures of a nihilistic vantage point. The superhuman appears in the horizon to enjoy sovereignty in separation from any superior power and to enjoy the aforementioned pleasures of nihilism (Anderson, 2016, p. 63). In this, Nietzsche is of course influenced by Darwin's "survival of the fittest" and a world where there is no place for the weak. Objective, Platonic and Christian Truths are annulled by Nietzsche and replaced by "perspectivism" or "relativism" (Anderson, 2016, p. 64). Also, the death of the author opens gates wide for endless interpretations since there is no final truth.

Nietzsche's nihilism is induced by his long health troubles, solitude and personal disillusionment with the world he lives in (Anderson, 2016, p. 73). Barthes goes through similar experiences. This

can be diagnosed as psychological nihilism which they descend into dramatically. Both also share the same aimlessness in their roaming around the world, which is reflected in their openness to various religions and cultures and consequently in their writings and philosophical proclivities.

Described by Terry Eagleton as "the first real atheist," Nietzsche is the philosopher who has endured the greatest impact of the claim of deicide (2014, p. 151). Meaninglessness, purposelessness, valuelessness, futility and absence of teleology are the walls of Nietzsche's Godless world (Eagleton, 2014, p. 154). Since there is no God, there is no "innate meaning" (Eagleton, 2014, p. 155). The Author as a source of meaning is refused by Nietzsche owing to the eternal impossibility of digging for an origin as long as there is no inherent meaning beyond anything. The only remaining truth is that there is no Truth; the only constant depth is depthlessness. The only person who can see this and avoid the illusions of religion is the Superman / Overman / post-human animal / new species of humanity / new form of humanity who is Nietzsche's New Species, simply because he has enough courage to look defiantly into the abyss of nothingness that epitomizes the universe (Eagleton, 2014, p. 155). The death of God / the death of Man / the death of humanity is the birth of the Overman. Human beings who depended on God in everything have become autonomous and independent as a new species known as the Overman (Eagleton, 2014, p. 159). Likewise, the death of the author is the birth of the reader who has creative powers never imagined before.

Ronald E. Osborn falls in with Eagleton when both assert that the death of God necessitates the death of Man and vice versa (Osborn, 2017, p. 174). In other words, Man in his old conception is dead, but Man as an Overman is born. Further, Nietzsche contends that civilization is hypocritical because it denies the existence of God while it maintains moral and religious creeds. Although Nietzsche claims, in *The Joyful Wisdom*, that the death of God is the main turning point in history, he argues that this declaration is underestimated (1910, p. 275). Since God's existence is only an illusion, all other metaphysical abstractions like truth, virtue and morality are destabilized (Eagleton, 2014, p. 156). The ostensible absence of God generates His meaning (Eagleton, 2014, p.

160). Also, the absence of the author unleashes new meanings for the literary text.

The conception of canon is derived from holy books like the Bible and the Quran (McConnell, 1990, p. 105). Therefore, the death of God is connected to the death of literature because the relinquishment of religion or Divine Truth by Nietzsche can be analogous to the abandonment of canonized literary texts by deconstructionists. The deconstructive claim of the vacuousness of texts puts an end to literature. For Derrida, a word and its meaning are identical only in the case of Presence which exists only in the speech of God who is an indefensible hypothesis (McConnell, 1990, p. 106). In this belief, Derrida follows Nietzsche's death of God. The process of signification becomes irrelevant because texts are meaningless, and all that remains is not the poet, dramatist or novelist but the critic. In other words, the literary text commits suicide in an act of self-destruction precipitated by deconstruction. It is too much self-awareness that kills. Hence, the literary text witnesses a process of evaporation without a trace (McConnell, 1990, p. 108).

Deconstructionists argue that no link can be located between literature and reality. Since there is no relation between literature and reality, literature is dead (McConnell, 1990, p. 109). Frank D. McConnell (1990) states that in comparison to other traditional theories of criticism, deconstruction is "a literary heresy," exactly as Gnosticism is a religious heresy in comparison to orthodox Christianity (p. 109). As Gnostics refuse any balance or unity in the universe, deconstructionists reject any balance or unity in the literary text. As Gnostics believe that God lies beyond this unbalanced universe, deconstructionists believe that the reader lurks beyond the literary text as a liberating force to provide a rereading of it (McConnell, 1990, p. 109). However, to complete the contrast, it can be said that Gnosticism has never been the death of Christianity, while deconstruction can be the death of literature.

The roads of Darwin's "survival of the fittest" and Nietzsche's "Overman" meet in the fulcrum of the subversive, manipulative and harmful nature of human beings (Osborn, 2017, p. 139). Nietzsche's conception of the Overman and annihilation of the weak are the bases on

which Nazism is built with catastrophic consequences on the human race in the twentieth century. If Nietzsche's philosophy is tenable, he will be the first person to be excised from his society because of his weakness and mental illness, and no one will be sympathetic with him. Nietzsche actually sanctions cruelty in dealing with the weak and establishes a hierarchical society in which the powerful dominates the powerless. While Divine religions confirm that God is in support of the weak, Nietzsche's Godless world upholds the strong (Osborn, 2017, p. 145). There is a stark contrast here between Nietzsche and Jesus: while Nietzsche excises the poor, sick and weak from his society, Jesus comes with promise to these categories and to end their misery.

Nietzsche longs for a premoral instinctive society before structuring morality in its modern meaning that proves destructive to human nature. This is why he valorizes the heathen Greco-Roman society and disparages the Christian world for its adherence to morality. Thus, he tends to prefer such powerful personas as Caesar, Napoleon and Dionysus; he also prefers such wild animals like lions and birds of prey. All share the propensity for aggression because he believes that life is a war (Osborn, 2017, pp. 151-152). Nietzsche declares, in *Ecce Homo*, that his philosophy will lead to "wars such as the earth has never seen" (2007, p. 144). This is absolutely true as crystallized in the Third Reich and WWII. Osborn clarifies that Nietzsche's Godless universe has no "transcendent" sense or morality (2017, p. 158). In this nihilistic universe, there is no place for the poor, weak or handicapped; it is devoted to the superior powers that dominate the inferior. In this world, Osborn comments, "Darkness is light" (2017, p. 158).

The death of God means the death of morality (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 297). When God disappears, many related beliefs and conceptions disappear with Him. The disappearance of the Supreme Author heralds the evaporation of any other author and the institution of literature with it. Richard Schacht confirms that in this world absolutes are rejected leaving the stage for relativism that takes over authority and dominates the scene (2012, p. 113). Consequently, any literary text is lost in an abyss of relativism according to what the reader wishes to discern.

Nietzsche first declared the death of God in *The Gay Science* in

1882 where he utilizes the term metaphorically to connote that the idea of God will be echoed for thousands of years to come and will haunt people for centuries. So, the role of the philosopher is to put an end to these resonances (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 167). The resonances refer to the various meanings imparted upon the different aspects of life and are influenced by the idea of Deity. Nietzsche contends that the idea of God is a kind of fabrication by humans to meet public and individual needs; it is self-deception (Schacht, 2012, pp. 116-117). Nietzsche targets God again and elaborates on the idea of the death of God in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). The claims of Nietzsche amount to the birth of nihilism. Moreover, it foreshadows the advent of the Overman that Nietzsche expects to be born sometime in the future from the womb of nihilism or nothingness (Schacht, 2012, p. 119).

Another metaphor that Nietzsche uses in his writings and which is closely related to the metaphor of the death of God is the one of the Overman or “the *Übermensch*.” Nietzsche's suggested remedy for nihilism is the Overman or the future post-human species that he anticipates to dominate the future of humanity. Attaching creativity to the Overman can be compared to the creative role of the reader after the death of the author preached by Barthes. As the Overman is supposed to change the face of the earth, the birth of the reader is supposed to change the face of literature or rather to put an end to literature. As the Overman will open new horizons for humanity, the reader will inaugurate a period of reading literature unprecedented before. Further, as the birth of the Overman will enhance or enrich human life on earth, the inauguration of the reader period will champion the process of reading literature. Religion and morality are conceived of by Nietzsche as shackles hindering humans from creativity (Schacht, 2012, p. 124). Likewise, adhering to the author hampers the creative powers of the reader.

Nietzsche's metaphors of the death of God and the Overman underscore the idea of creativity and artistic or aesthetic value that are also valorized by Barthes' theory of the death of the author that unleashes paths of creativity on the part of the reader. This process of self-creation is discussed by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*. He writes, “[W]e want to be the poets of our life” (1882/1974, p. 240). This aesthetic aspect the

Overman is closely related to the aesthetic aspect of recreating the literary text by the reader. The Overman gives sense and prospect to a senseless world as the reader gives meaning and future to the meaningless literary text. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche attaches creativity to Zarathustra as a harbinger of the Overman (Schacht, 2012, p. 128).

Death of the Author

"The Death of the Author" was published in 1968 by Roland Barthes to become instantly very popular in the critical circles as a post-structuralist text and to evoke reproach at the same time (Allen, 2004, p. 73). Kris Pint (2010) comments, "This article served as one of the most notorious programmatic texts of post-structuralism influenced literary studies and was a direct attack on the dominant position occupied by the author in literary criticism" (p. 230). Barthes initiates his essay with the fact of the loss of the author's identity, voice, or origin in the recesses of the literary work. The author's product is not innovative or original; the author is only a "relator" or narrator (Barthes, 1968/1977, 142). This is why Barthes criticizes the conventional culture for the dominant role of the author over the literary work. The domination of the author over the literary work is furthered by new criticism. The French poet and critic Stephane Mallarme (1842-1898) cautions very early against this domination and argues that language should replace the author who disputably represents the possessor of the text. As a result, Mallarme inaugurates an epoch when the writer's role is marginalized and the reader starts to take over his new place under light. Moreover, the French poet, essayist, and philosopher Paul Valery (1871-1945) ridicules the role of the author and considers any attempt to refer to the psyche of the author unbelievable myth (Barthes, 1968/1977, 143-144). The French novelist, critic, and essayist Marcel Proust (1871-1922), further, mixes and confuses the roles of the writer and characters in his novels till the possibility of distinction becomes dim. Surrealism practices the role of iconoclasm towards the authority of the writer by attributing the task of writing not to a single head but to many (Barthes, 1968/1977, 144).

The post-structuralist theories about language subvert the traditional role of the author by claiming that the process of signification

itself is pointless and futile. The role of the author dwindles gradually from the literary scene till it disappears in the post-modern era, declaring bluntly the absence of the author. Death of the Referent means death of the author which is analogous to the death of the original person as reflected in his photograph (Derrida, 2000, p. 133). Derrida (2000) explains, “[T]he reference and death are hand in hand in the photograph” (p. 134). As the person in the photograph is absent, so does the referent. This is not only a literary truth, but it is a historical one as well, as proved by the previously mentioned examples of French authors. The relationship between the author and his book is not a relation of a god to his creation, that is, the writer must come before the work in time. On the contrary, the scripter and his script spring at the same moment from the same spring of language (Barthes, 1968/1977, 145).

As the author and his work emanate from the same fountain of language, the author pursues an origin without origin. In other words, the author eternally traces a center i.e. language that actually is centerless. Language is an endless system of signification in which every signifier refers to a signified that turns into another signifier and so on. The godless/authorless/centerless universe of the literary text does not have a single meaning; it has endless meanings. The literary text is an inexhaustible source of readings. Originality is negated in this universe since all texts or utterances are repetitions or imitations of ready-made expressions in dictionaries where signs/words refer to each other interminably (Barthes, 1968/1977, 146). The author thinks and feels through the words of language; he is confined within the borders of the borderless dictionary from which he derives his utterances or signs. The author is an enormous book in which the meaning of each sign is postponed perpetually (Barthes, 1968/1977, 147).

Dethroning the author coincides with deposing the critic because the traditional role of the critic is to reveal the historical, social or psychological background of the author. As this role is not the one assigned to the critic in deconstruction, the critic is no longer an authority over the text. The process of interpreting a text according to Barthes is similar to that of unraveling the thread of a piece of cloth. Once the thread is untied, the whole texture collapses into unspecified entity that

can be reshaped and read in infinite ways. The deconstructed texture can be constructed again in indefinite manners. Nothing will focus on the individual who constructs or deconstructs the raw material. All the focus is on the deconstructed text. There is no final shape for the deconstructed text; all possibilities are acceptable and none of them can claim the upper hand. This revolution in literary theory unsettles the long-established theological or metaphysical concepts like Deity, reason or law (Barthes, 1968/1977, 147). Thus, Nietzsche is the forerunner of deconstruction and consequently the death of literature. Furthermore, Barthes contends that signifiers on a page are similar to stars in the firmament. They can be arranged and rearranged in endless ways that give new meanings each time. Only an astrologer/reader can understand these different relations within the sky/the literary text (Pint, 2010, p. 137).

The real tragedy of Greek tragedy is that the utterances are interpreted univocally by the characters in spite of the ambiguity of these plays. The only exception to this classic way of reading a text is the reader according to post-structuralist theory. In this radical reading, every innovative interpretation is a kind of rewriting the original text by the reader who turns to be a fulcrum where multivocity is concentrated. This is why *the unity of the text* resides not in the source but in the estuary. The reader no longer resorts to the historical, social or psychological background of the author, but he turns to the traces of the text. It is high time for the long-ignored role of the reader to be rehabilitated at the expense of the long-established role of the writer. The reader's rewriting (reading) of the text is highlighted, while the original writing of the author moves to the peripheries (Barthes, 1968/1977, 148).

The freedom of the reader is unleashed not by the words inscribed on a page but by the unlimited imagination of the reader. This can be exactly compared to reading a painting in which the figures themselves are dead as well as the painter, while the interpreter, through his reading, gives them life in ways previously unimagined (Pint, 2010, pp. 14-15). Barthes' perverse reading can be epitomized in assuming a "fictional character" through the reader's imagination, which uncovers unmapped territories never explored before (Pint, 2010, p. 134).

Barthes casts doubts on the role of the author's intentions in

reading a literary work as well as the role of the critic in presenting universal interpretations (Pint, 2010, p. 22). While the author is dethroned from the kingdom of literary theory, the reader is crowned as the new king. The reader is no longer confined within the borders of the author's intention, nor the author's history, biography or psychology (Pint, 2010, p. 136).

In his book *S/Z*, Barthes differentiates between two types of texts: the readerly and the writerly or *Lisible* and *Scriptible*. He points out that the former presents fixed traditional readings of the text in a process where the reader is a passive receptacle that only accepts and cannot change that meaning, while the latter is the perfect way of reading as it offers the reader as a creator of meaning who showcases unprecedented interpretations (Pint, 2010, pp.137-138). Barthes writes, "The writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure" (1970/2002, p. 5). Graham Allen (2004) expounds that a simplification of the difference between these two kinds of texts is that the readerly text is "irreversible" and clearly interpreted and is represented by pre-modern works, while that the writerly text is "reversible" and polysemic and is represented by avant-garde works (p. 88). Nevertheless, Barthes contends, in "From Work to Text," that some pre-modern works can be texts, whereas some avant-garde works are not texts (1984/1989a, p. 57). Replacing the term literary work by text is used by Barthes to deface the notion of an author beyond the work. The term text, for Barthes, refers to writing as intertextuality or text that is no longer original, but a collage of various previous contributions (Allen, 2004, p. 76). Elizabeth Wright (2000) expounds, "[R]eaders write in the act of reading and writers . . . read in the act of writing" (p. 184). This is why the reader in his act of reading may surpass or transgress what the author wishes to say (Wright, 2000, p. 184). The reader's creativity is enhanced by the writerly text (Pint, 2010, p. 155).

Undermining all centers of reading a literary text whether it be the sign or the author, intertextuality is a term that posits that the literary text is a space where texts from all places and all times intermingle to form the text in hand. The traditional notion about the author as a center for

meaning is replaced by the idea that he only collects and combines the text in hand from previous works. Therefore, the old idea about the author as a God orienting all the actions in his universe/fiction is now itself a fiction that is not plausible; the author has the mere function of a collector of data from other sources. The creative position of the author is replaced by the new non-original role. Even the words that the author harnesses in his work are already available in dictionaries; even these words in dictionaries are interpreted by other words endlessly without ever reaching an ultimate center (Allen, 2004, p. 81).

With the 1960s, Barthes started to highlight the individuality of the reader in interpreting a literary text, in a revolutionary step towards post-structuralism after spending years in the structuralist camp. Barthes' evolutionary approach is crystallized in his conception of "pleasure" that the reader experiences in construing a text. Thus, Barthes' "The Death of the Author" is linked to *The Pleasure of the Text* (Pint, 2010, p. 134). According to Barthes, the measure of truth is derived from the reader's pleasure of the text (Pint, 2010, p. 140). This "perspectivism" means that there is no final truth, in other words, no final meaning; all are mere perspectives (Osborn, 2017, p. 136). One should be skeptical about the possibility of having a final word (Osborn, 2017, p. 137). This perspectivism is corollary of the death of God (Osborn 140). There is no view, even scientific views, that is purely unbiased (Osborn, 2017, p. 141).

Barthes revalues the position of the author when he declares the author's return (1989b, p. 8). Nevertheless, the author who returns is not the one abandoned before in "The Death of the Author." Barthes denies the author as an authority who imposes his intention on the interpretation of the text; but he accepts the author as a character envisaged by the reader in the text, that is to say, a fictional character (Pint, 2010, pp. 230-231). The author engages the reader in an imaginary world where the latter envisions the former as a fictional character (Pint, (2010, p. 233).

Barthes is eclectic in the application of his theory about the death of the author. Sean Burke (1998) postulates that Barthes accepts the biographies or even the diaries of some authors in his reading of their literature and abandons this biographical background of others. In other

words, Barthes contradicts himself; he rejects the author as dead in his earlier works, but later he restores the author's position in literary readings. For instance, he utilizes the biographies of such authors as Michelet, Proust, Bataille, Sollers and others, whereas he relinquishes that of Balzac (Burke, 1998, p. 41). Pint attributes this to the fact that the former writers appeal to Barthes' feelings as an interpreter (2010, p. 231). It is an issue of emotional attraction to these authors.

Barthes differentiates between signification and signifiante. The former refers to the meaning of the text as a final product, that is, the signifiers refer to transcendental signifieds, while the latter refers to the text as production, that is, the meaning of the text as reproduced by the reader (Allen, 2004, pp. 83-84). In addition, Barthes explains the difference between the traditional idea of the work and the post-structuralist idea of the text by arguing that the literary work remains a work till the reader recreates its meaning; in this case it becomes a text. Exactly like a stocking whose thread is unraveled, the thread can be reshaped infinitely while the textile itself remains the same; it consists of the old traces from previous authors. For instance, a modern poem about love carries in its essence all the traces of previous poets speaking about love. Nothing new or original is created by the author; what is original is the reading given by the reader (Allen, 2004, p. 83).

Death of Literature

What Kernan means by the death of literature is the death of Romantic and Modern literature i.e. the literature between the mid 18th century and the mid 20th century (Kernan, 1990, pp. 5-6). This death has several manifestations: a) death of literature (belles lettres) emerges with the birth of radical criticism at the hands of Deconstruction; b) death refers to diminishing interest in the Humanities, especially literature at university; c) death denotes death of the aesthetic quality and birth of the ideological and political trend in literature; d) the literary text as completely original no longer survives in face of intertextuality, collages and anxiety of influence; e) the end of the classical age of reading or the printed book or traditional libraries heralds the end of literature. Books, in their traditional paper form, are decaying gradually on their shelves in the libraries, indicating the close of the printed-book era and literature in

its conventional conception. Disappearance of the traditional libraries with their large buildings of wood, bricks and concrete to be replaced by electronic or digital databases is the new trend. This trend drives another nail in the coffin of literature in its romantic and modern conception (Kernan, 1990).

The book has become a commodity or a good or a product that is merchandised rather than a literary value, which itself is very "unliterary" (Kernan, 1990, p. 137). This unliterariness reflects another symptom of the death of literature. The unavoidable and insurmountable obstacles confronting the use and storage of printed books contribute to the throes of the book or literature era (Kernan, 1990, pp. 139-140). The printed book has been crowned on the throne of knowledge for about five hundred years, just to have recently been toppled down by electronic databases (Kernan, 1990, p. 140). Electronics have become the main means of communication instead of printed literature. The end of old order of literature goes hand in hand with the turn to postindustrialism and its offshoot of electronic media (Kernan, 1990, p. 143). The post-modern tendency of the American academia to teach reading and writing skills instead of literature at English departments increases the marginalization of literature (Kernan, 1990). The disappearance of book-based literature and appearance of electronic media along with a kind of radical criticism that problematizes the process of interpretation are all complicit in the demise of literature.

A pertinent aspect of the death of literature is the death of the author. The death of the author in television productions is a case in point: the author of literature figures prominently through the literary work; however, the author of a movie is relegated to the margins in comparison to the star-actor, producer or director (Kernan, 1990, p. 148). Not only the role of the author has changed, but also the role of the audience has been dramatically modified. It is a shift from the isolation or solipsism of reading to "the global village" or "the lonely crowd" (Kernan, 1990, p. 148). In other words, the audience has become interested in issues that are globally shared all over the world like the news about a war, an earthquake or any other catastrophic event in any part of the world. This transformation from the printed-book culture to

the television culture marks the death of literature. The reader of a printed book is more active than the audience of a program on TV as the reader tries to decipher the signs on the page of a book to get deeper into their meanings and the message beyond them; however, the audience of a TV program are passive, just like a receptacle always ready to be filled with data. Thus, the shift marks the end of the reader era and the beginning of the audience era. The building bricks of literature are verbal words, whereas the raw materials for television are the visual images. As a result, the message of literature is conveyed in a sophisticated manner because there are usually various layers of meaning in the text that the reader pursues, yet the message on TV is usually presented superficially and straightforwardly. The domination of the visual image demarcates the death of literature (Kernan, 1990, p. 149). Since the number of readers decreases and the number of viewers or spectators increases, and since the interest in reading dwindles away and the interest in watching TV flourishes, the future of the verbal word seems so dim, while the prospects of the visual images seem so bright (Kernan, 1990, p. 151). In other words, it is the end of literature and the birth of mass media and mass culture.

The difference between literature and television can be crystallized in two main points: how the message is conveyed and how the message is interpreted. First, the message in literature is conveyed through verbal signs, while on TV the message is delivered through visual images. The message in literature is complex, ambiguous, permanent and multilayered, whereas the message on TV is direct, temporary and simple. As for the interpretation of the message, the meanings in literature are indeterminate and endless, but on TV, the message is simple and clear (Kernan, 1990, pp. 149-150). Mass media and mass culture have overshadowed literature and printed books. The difference between literature and television is that language on TV is supported by visual images and other props.

The decline of language in the current century is a decline of literature itself. Authors like Hemingway, Beckett, Kafka and others "deliberately reduced the language of literature to the barest and plainest terms" (Kernan, 1990, p. 162). The emptiness of language and meaning

reflects the emptiness of literature in works like Faulkner's and Beckett's. This emptiness is supported by the skepticism prevalent about the system of language in general. From a poststructuralist perspective, the deficient nature of language echoes the deficiency of literature (Kernan, 1990, p. 162). As romantic and modern literature claim their authority over language, structuralism and deconstruction have threatened this authority that has been maintained up till now through the influence of Samuel Johnson's dictionary (Kernan, 1990, p. 176). Once literature had the upper hand to influence language, but now with the structuralist and poststructuralist theories of language, literature has lost the lead and has become a follower of the whimsies of language (Kernan, 1990, p. 188).

The future status of literature on the epistemological hierarchy as a vehicle of truth and a tool of social influence is threatened (Kernan, 1990, p. 195). The failure of the Humanities to use a scientific method to study their objects, unlike natural sciences and social sciences, puts them at the tail of the epistemological hierarchy at university today, which is very close to disappearance as academic specialties (Kernan, 1990, p. 198).

Deconstructionists destabilize the role of literature by claiming that it is meaningless or pointless; feminists argue that literature is a repressive power that deprives women of their rights; Marxists criticize literature as an ideological tool to reinforce the power of the bourgeoisie (Kernan, 1990, pp. 200-201). The death of literature has started to loom in the horizon with the emergence of such literary theories as Marxism, reader-response criticism, structuralism, deconstruction and feminism (Kernan, 1990, p. 207). The place of literature on the epistemological hierarchy, its status as an academic discipline at university, and its position on the social ladder have witnessed a dramatic change today and have been replaced by communications as a more promising and fruitful discipline (Kernan, 1990, p. 202).

Romantic and modern literature is marked by a number of features that are absent in later literature of the twentieth century and the current one: literary works were assumed to have spiritual power, to spring from creative imagination, to reveal truth and message that engage the reader with the author in a unique relation, and to have an impact that

exceedingly goes beyond the kind of direct truths conveyed by sciences (Kernan, 1990, p. 203). Plots after WWII tend to reflect the meaninglessness of texts in contradiction to the plots before the war. With man's first landing on the moon in 1969, the significance of sciences and scientific breakthroughs is much highlighted in comparison to literature that has become marginalized (Kernan, 1990, p. 204). In the age of the Apollo mission and the great triumphs of science, there is no place for literature in its romantic and modern conception. The advent of the Apollo mission is the dusk night of literature (Kernan, 1990, p. 207).

There have been tremendous social and cultural changes in the past fifty years responsible for the throes of literature on its deathbed: the appearance of mass media represented mainly by TV and electronic means of communication in addition to the rise of deconstruction on the critical or literary stage. These enormous transformations in the society and literary theory contribute to the apparent anarchy given the name postindustrialism and postmodernism leading to the death of literature under the hearing and sight of literary people. This is why the death of romantic and modern literature can be tantamount to a suicide (Kernan, 1990, pp. 209-210).

The romantic and modern conception of literature is already no longer compatible; the new conception of both is playing a social role. For example, deconstruction dissolves the general truths claimed by the old order of literature through undoing the appearance of truth claimed by some ideologies as well as uncovering systems of hegemony practiced by these systems of thought. Another example, cultural materialism defends people against discrimination according to race, class, gender, sexuality, religion or color. Other literary theories that have social causes are feminism, Afro-American studies, queer theory, new historicism and Marxism. These literary theories advocate such enlightenment ideals as justice, liberty and equality and such post-modern principles as "openness," "relativism," "individualism" and tolerance (Kernan, 1990, p. 211). Kernan argues that his problem with feminism or the other post-modernist literary theories is not whether their claims are right and just or not, but the problem is related to whether these theories can keep canonical texts like Homer, Shakespeare and Milton or not. If these texts

are ignored to give way to post-modernist works of feminists, for example, then nothing will remain for us as literature (Kernan, 1990, p. 212).

Literature has become a purely philosophical, social and political apparatus. Deconstructive critics assert that the literary text is pointless and empty. Marxists stress the fact that the literary text is a hegemonic force to maintain a certain social class the upper hand and silencing other social groups. Feminists argue that literature is a tool of subjugating women to the power of men. Post-Colonialism conceives of literature as a way to oppress weaker nations. Thus, Shakespeare can be read according to deconstruction as meaningless, by Marxism as the trumpet of monarchy, by feminism as patriarchal and by post-colonialists as a bloody racist (Kernan, 1990, p. 212-213).

Kernan concludes that the radical literary theories of the Post-Modern era are actually not original. They are exaggerated forms of previous critical postures. The close reading of deconstructive criticism is derived from older forms of formalist criticism like New Criticism. Also, the concept of indeterminacy in deconstructive criticism has its origin in the seven types of ambiguity explained by Sir William Empson for New Criticism. The strong onslaught against the modern capitalistic society is a new version of the romantic critique of the industrial society. However, while the old romantic literature acclaims literature as creative work, Marxism denounces it as a negative tool of supporting capitalism. This is why the older forms of these radical theories are considered positive, whereas the new ones are extremely negative or rather subversive to the life of literature (Kernan, 1990, p. 213).

Since the old order of literature is associated with an anti-mechanical tendency, nature, spontaneity, mystery and humanism, Romantic and Modernist literature can no longer survive in the post-modern era (Kernan, 1990, p. 20). Moreover, literature has become confined within the borders of the academic walls, in other words, at universities (Kernan, 1990, p. 32). Additionally, being governed by the rules of sciences is the first nail in the coffin of literature. It is a sign of death to literature (Kernan, 1990, p. 57). Scientism is death for literature. For example, Structuralism reaches an impasse in its approach to

literature.

In his article “The Dis-Appearance of Writing: Literature and the Imaginary,” Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (2014) delineates the prospects of literature in a more positive way. Although such contemporary writers as Alvin Kernan, Sven Birkerts, Robert Coover and others have written about the potential death of literature in a digital age, Wurth still believes that digital writing is not the end of writing literature; it is only a new way of conceiving writing. He adds that digital writing enjoys a number of merits: “less time-consuming, visually exciting, plastic” (p. 79). With this optimistic vantage point, Wurth envisions not a destruction of destination, but just a change in the road to it. The source of data in the past was the book; now it is the Internet. Nevertheless, Wurth argues that this possible end of literary writing does not come from without but from within, that is, the “invisibility” or “opacity” of alphabetic writing – using mere arbitrary signs – is the demise of this kind of writing in confrontation with the visibility, attraction and transparency of visual images (Wurth, 2014, p. 78). So, if this end is imaginable, it is because of the nature of alphabetic writing, not because of the digital age we are living in. When the reader interprets signs, he deciphers opaque codes on a page. However, when he reads technical images, he has nothing to decode; he has straightforward vision of the experience. In literary writing, the reader looks for meaning beyond signifiers. Yet, in technical images, the viewer does not search for anything; he looks directly at meaning. This viewpoint goes hand in hand with post-structuralism that conceives of language as opaque and equivocal. Thus, it is not affected by the author’s intention, but by the reader’s reception – a view which points to Barthes’ death of the author at the end of the road.

Conclusion

In short, the vagueness of the term “death” surrounds the meanings Nietzsche, Barthes and Kernan refer to in their writings. Nietzsche declares the death of God, as Barthes announces the death of the author, and Kernan foresees the death of literature. Although it may appear that each of them uses the term “death” with different

connotations, there remain interrelationships or correlations shared by all of them.

The metaphor of death is unequivocally evident in the works of these three intellectuals. The conception of Deity has been a living one since the cradle of humanity up to the advent of Nietzsche who declared its end. What Nietzsche actually means is that God does not exist. Hence, how can a non-existent being be dead? It means that the long-established belief in Him is now indefensible. The role of the author in reading any text has been immanent in any literary work till Barthes declared the death of the author. Literature has been a living institution until the post-modern era which puts an end to this long-living entity as foreseen by Kernan. The death of God foreshadows the death of the author as the former overthrows the Absolute Author with all His Authority in the universe, paving the way for overthrowing the authority of the author over his literary text. Both the death of God and the death of the author are the deconstructive backdrops of the death of literature at the hands of post-modernism, mass media and mass culture. The underlying principle in the three deaths is that the world and literature are without meaning, value, truth or purpose.

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