# Notions of Authorship

*This essay offers suggestions for how material on the Great Writers Inspire site can be used as a starting point for exploration of or classroom discussion about notions of authorship. Questions for reflection or discussion are highlighted in the text. Links in the text point to resources in the Great Writers Inspire site. The resources can also be found via the 'Notions of Authorship [1]' start page. Further material can be found via our Library [2] and via the various writers and theme pages.*

It is both difficult and tempting to hunt for the author within a work of literature. He or she is the deus ex machina, the ringmaster, and the world-builder. Yet obscured by characters, ironic sensibilities, editors, and time, the quest can become quixotic, even impossible. And often times this obscuring of the man behind the curtain is very much the author's intention. Great Writers Inspire provides basic biographies of most of our writers in the 'essay' tab, but biographical background can only take a reader so far; the works don't always follow the life.

There is a fear, it seems, among those who decide the meaning of a work of literature is determined by the author's intentions: a fear that to imagine otherwise is to invite chaos, an infinite number of potential interpretations, and to place reader above author in the literary hierarchy.

But according to theorist Roland Barnes in his 1967 essay *What is an Author*, the meaning of a text is in no way dependent upon a writer's identity, position in the world, biography, or political agenda. Rather, relying on the author to find meaning scuttles literary analysis. Barnes writes that we cannot know an author's intention, and to imagine otherwise is counterproductive, forcing a tyrannical interpretation of a work open to other possibilities. The "scriptor", Barnes' alternative to the author, is born at the same time as the text, without intention, feeling, past, or future. And so for Barnes it is the reader rather than author that is most essential.

Two years after the publication of Barnes' essay, Michael Foucault gave his seminal lecture 'What is an Author?', which accepted the idea that the traditional author is dead, and proceeded to discuss the function of a new author for a postmodern world. The author exists not as an interpretive system, but as a function of the text. According to Foucault, the idea of authorship was created to serve certain functions that govern the production, circulation, organisation, consumption, and valuation of texts.

The four main aspects of Foucault's author function are:

1. The author function addresses the need to identify a creator of a text in order that the legal system can punish those who issue transgressive statements.
2. The author function has different impacts on different kinds of texts. For example, we are much more concerned with the author of a work of literature than the author of a scientific textbook. Foucault says that all authors are writers, but not all writers are authors.
3. The author function is much trickier than it seems. The author is not necessarily who wrote the text; it

is the name with which readers associate the text, and with that name come a variety of assumptions about style, quality, historical context. The author is not a person; it is a construction. If we discovered that Dickens had not written *Great Expectations*, Dickens functionally would still be the novel's author; not Dickens the man, but Dickens the idea.

4. The 'author' does not need to refer to one person. It can refer to many people serving a variety of purposes in the production of the text. So when we think of T. S. Eliot as the 'author' of *The Wasteland* , the author we imagine includes both the individuals T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, since Pound edited the poem so heavily as to be largely responsible for the final work.

But despite postmodern assertions that the author is dead, better understanding of the author can help with the GCE English A-level assessment goal of understanding significance and influence of a literary work's context. And analysis of an author also may allow students to separate the myth of the author from his or her work, that a student may better examine the linguistics of the writing independently of the author's intentions. What follows are some Great Writers Inspire resources one can use to approach notions of authorship and try to understand a work through, and despite, its creator.

**Collaboration**

In her podcast on William Shakespeare's *Pericles* [3], part of the Approaching Shakespeare series, Dr. Emma Smith discusses the importance of collaboration between early modern playwrights. From 11:20-14:45, Smith explains the industry-wide practice of collaboration in the world of Renaissance theatre. From 16:48-20:56, she discusses the collaborative nature of *Pericles*, specifically:

*How does the knowledge of Shakespeare's collaborative work affect your image of Shakespeare, the author?*

From 23:32-29:00, Smith discusses the significance to the authorship of *Pericles* of Shakespeare's use of the poet Gower as narrator of the play. Gower was the writer of the poem on which the play was based, and the speeches by the character Gower mimic the writing forms employed by the real Gower. Smith talks about how Shakespeare's use of Gower supports theories of inter-textuality and the inherent interrelatedness of all literature.

*Can Shakespeare's plays be examined properly as isolated texts, or do they have to be viewed in the contexts of their influences and the works they in turn influence?*

From 10:08-16:06, Smith discusses the role of the 1623 Shakespeare First Folio in dictating what is considered part of the Shakespearian canon, Shakespeare's genres, and our image of the playwright.

Other Shakespeare plays known to have collaborative aspects include:

- With Thomas Middleton [4]: *All's Well that Ends Well, Macbeth, Measure for Measure, Timon of Athens*
- With John Fletcher: *Henry VIII, The Two Noble Kinsmen*

Also take a look at the works of other Renaissance playwrights who engaged in collaborative efforts:

- Thomas Dekker [5]
- Ben Jonson [6]
- Thomas Middleton [4]
- John Webster [7]

**Promoting Authorship**

Listen to Dr. Margaret Kean discussing John Milton in the academic panel discussion 'What is a Great Writer?'

[8] (from 11:16-25:04). Kean addresses how awareness of John Milton [9] as a radical would have impacted contemporary audience's understandings of *Paradise Lost [10]* as a revolutionary text, Milton's positioning of himself as a great writer with his introduction to the text and his explanation of his choice to forego rhyme in the tradition of classical literature, and modern understandings of Milton as an author placed beside familiarity of Phillip Pullman's re-working of *Paradise Lost* in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

**Obscuring Authorship**

For female novelists in the Victorian period, much of developing an image of themselves as authors meant disguising their genders or identities. Consider: Jane Austen [11] publishing *Sense and Sensibility* [12] as having been written by 'a lady'; Charlotte Brontë [13] publishing under the pseudonym Currer Bell; and George Eliot [14]'s true identity as Marian Evans:

*Why do we refer to Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë by their real names today, but the woman born Mary Ann Evans continues to be known as George Eliot? How would your perception of Brontë and Eliot's novels change if you thought them to be written by a man? Can we examine the novelists separately from their identity as 'women writers'?*

Listen to historical receptions of Eliot's work and Eliot herself in Dr. Catherine Brown's podcast [15]. Also check out Professor Kathryn Sutherland's podcast The Watsons: Jane Austen Practicing [16], which discusses what we can learn about Jane Austen the author from the manuscripts of her unpublished early novel The Watsons [17].

**The Politics of Authorship**

It is often a charged and controversial literary issue extricating a writer from his or her work, and determining a writer's true identity. Consider the Shakespeare Authorship Controversy [18], where the very identity of the authorship of the plays attributed to William Shakespeare is called into question.

*What assumptions about the nature of writing and the notion of authorship underlie challenges to the identity of Shakespeare?*

Why are we so determined to read into Shakespeare's plays and find out about Shakespeare the man as well as Shakespeare the writer? Listen to Dr. Emma Smith's podcast on *The Tempest* [19], which tries to answer the age-old question, is Prospero intended to be read as a self-portrait of Shakespeare? And is that a useful reading of *The Tempest*?

In Dr. Abigail Williams' adapted lecture 'Who is Aphra Behn?' [20], Williams discusses the difficulty of trying to find the author in the works, and the personal and political agendas that can be seen in different critics' characterizations of the elusive playwright and poet.

In her adapted lectures on Jonathan Swift, Williams continues to debate the question of authorship. In the sections 'Authorship and Identity' and 'Originality' in the essay 'Jonathan Swift and *A Tale of a Tub*' [21], Williams writes about deliberate obscuring of the *Tale*'s author using narrators, and Swift's heavy borrowing from and parodying of previous works of literature. In Jonathan Swift and *Gulliver's Travels*' [22], Williams discusses similar literary games played by Swift with fictional narrators and writers of frontispiece, Swift's obscuring of the line between fact and fiction, and the origins of Gulliver's narrative in a collective work written by the Scriblerus Club.

In the essay The Importance of Being Wilde [23], the section on Wilde's legacy discusses the posthumous transformation of Wilde into a gay icon, despite him having gone to court to deny allegations of sodomy.

*Why has Wilde been adopted as symbol of the homosexual movement? What impact does it have on modern criticism and performances of his works?*

Take a look at Dr. Emma Smith's blogpost What Does a Great Writer Look Like? [24] in the Great Writers Inspire blog [25]:

*How does the visual representation of a writer impact your ideas of that writer and his or her works?*

Spend some time exploring our picture tabs for different writers, and think about the impressions given by different portraits or photographs

**Narration and Style**

Listen to Dr. Catherine Brown's Literature and Form podcast, Unreliable Narrators [26]. Amid her discussions of the types of unreliable narrators, Brown talks about the difficulty in finding the author when even the narrator's opinions or understanding are in doubt. At 27:45 she discusses the facetiousness of the writing of Jane Austen [11], and at 28:20 she discusses Lawrence [27]'s self-mockery in his creation of an exaggerated, jester self in *Mr. Moon*

It's worth taking into consideration the extent to which a writer's circumstances impact the writing style of his or her text.

*How does it change your assessment of the works of Charles Dickens [28] to know that he was paid by the word?*

Listen to Dr. Robert Douglas--Fairhurst's podcast 'Why Dickens?' [29], which discusses how Dickens' impoverished origins affected his writing.

**Translation**

Listen to Oliver Taplin and Lorna Hardwick's podcast Is There Ever a Faithful Translation? [30], part of their *What is Translation?* series (see all episodes on the Oxford Podcasts website [31]).

*How does their question of what entails a faithful translation reflect on your ideas of the true author of a translated work? Can a translator reproduce the original author's style and personality? To what extent?*

*Can a staged production of a play re-produce the author's intentions? To what extent can the work of the director, the author, and the actors be distinguished on stage?*

Check out our Early Modern Drama on the Page and Stage [32] section for resources on how written plays can be 'translated' for the stage.

**Great Writers Inspire: Biographical Essays of Authors**

The Great Writers Inspire site contains a number or biographical essays on different authors. Explore these, and other essays, via the library [33]. You can also browse the list of writers with Great Writers Inspire collections [34].

- Jane Austen [35]
- Aphra Behn [36]

- Charlotte Brontë [13]
- Frances Burney [37]
- J. M. Coetzee [38]
- Joseph Conrad [39]
- Thomas Dekker [40]
- Stephen Duck [41]
- George Eliot [42]
- Thomas Hardy [43]
- Gerard Manley Hopkins [44]
- Ben Jonson [45]
- Rudyard Kipling [46]
- Mary Leapor [47]
- Sir Thomas Malory [48]
- Christopher Marlowe [49]
- Thomas Middleton [50]
- William Shakespeare [51]
- Robert Louis Stevenson [52]
- John Webster [53]
- Walt Whitman [54]
- Oscar Wilde [55]

Other resources by and about the Great Writers can be found via the individual writers' pages [34] (for example under the Other and eBook tabs).

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**Links**
[1] http://writersinspire.org/themes/notions-authorship
[2] http://writersinspire.org/library
[3] http://writersinspire.org/content/pericles-prince-tyre
[4] http://writersinspire.org/writers/thomas-middleton
[5] http://writersinspire.org/writers/thomas-dekker
[6] http://writersinspire.org/writers/ben-jonson
[7] http://writersinspire.org/writers/john-webster
[8] http://writersinspire.org/content/what-great-writer-academic-panel-discussion

[9] http://writersinspire.org/writers/john-milton
[10] http://writersinspire.org/content/paradise-lost-poem-ten-books-1667
[11] http://writersinspire.org/writers/jane-austen
[12] http://writersinspire.org/content/sense-sensibility-0
[13] http://writersinspire.org/writers/charlotte-bront%C3%AB
[14] http://writersinspire.org/writers/george-eliot
[15] http://writersinspire.org/content/george-eliot-3-reception-history
[16] http://writersinspire.org/content/watsons-jane-austen-practising
[17] http://writersinspire.org/content/watsons
[18] http://writersinspire.org/content/why-shakespeare-was-shakespeare
[19] http://writersinspire.org/content/tempest
[20] http://writersinspire.org/content/who-aphra-behn
[21] http://writersinspire.org/content/jonathan-swift-tale-tub
[22] http://writersinspire.org/content/jonathan-swift-gullivers-travels
[23] http://writersinspire.org/content/importance-being-wilde
[24] https://writersinspire.wordpress.com/2012/01/01/what-does-a-great-writer-look-like/
[25] https://writersinspire.wordpress.com/
[26] http://writersinspire.org/content/literature-form-1-unreliable-narrators
[27] http://writersinspire.org/writers/dh-lawrence
[28] http://writersinspire.org/writers/charles-dickens
[29] http://writersinspire.org/content/why-dickens
[30] http://writersinspire.org/content/there-ever-faithful-translation
[31] http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/what-translation
[32] http://writersinspire.org/themes/early-modern-drama-page-stage
[33] http://writersinspire.org/library?title=&field_episode_media_type_value[]=essay
[34] http://writersinspire.org/writers
[35] http://writersinspire.org/content/anonymous-jane-austen
[36] http://writersinspire.org/content/aphra-behn-life-dedicated-pleasure-poetry
[37] http://writersinspire.org/content/frances-burney-mother-english-fiction
[38] http://writersinspire.org/content/jm-coetzee-1
[39] http://writersinspire.org/content/joseph-conrad
[40] http://writersinspire.org/content/thomas-dekker
[41] http://writersinspire.org/content/stephen-duck
[42] http://writersinspire.org/content/george-eliot-0
[43] http://writersinspire.org/content/thomas-hardy
[44] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/gerard-manley-hopkins
[45] http://writersinspire.org/content/ben-jonson-renaissance-playwright-renaissance-man
[46] http://writersinspire.org/content/rudyard-kipling
[47] http://writersinspire.org/content/mary-leapor-1
[48] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/thomas-malory-introduction
[49] http://writersinspire.org/content/who-killed-christopher-marlowe-why
[50] http://writersinspire.org/content/thomas-middleton-no-wit-no-help-playwrights
[51] http://writersinspire.org/content/william-shakespeare
[52] http://writersinspire.org/content/robert-louis-stevenson
[53] http://writersinspire.org/content/john-webster-darker-playwright-renaissance-england
[54] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/walt-whitman
[55] http://writersinspire.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/content/importance-being-wilde