

## ART FOR ART'S SAKE: DEATH OF THE AUTHOR IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

Ajimuda, Olufunsho Stephen<sup>1\*</sup>

Aminu, Olusegun<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Rufus Giwa Polytechnic, Owo, Ondo State, Nigeria.

\*corresponding author: [ajistephen68@gmail.com](mailto:ajistephen68@gmail.com)

**Citation:** Ajimuda, O.S. & Aminu, O. (2020). Art for art's sake: Death of the author in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *KIU Interdisciplinary Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(2), 68-78

### ABSTRACT

---

The poetics of modern literature can be divided into two broad spectra - the linguistic and the extra-linguistic principles. According to Abrams (1973:4), whatever the language of all critical theories, they discriminate four elements in the total situation of a work of art. These four elements are: the mimetic theory, the pragmatic theory, the expressive theory and the objective theory. Since the advent of the Objective theory in the 19th century, exponents of this school regard art as non-didactic, that is, one whose end-purpose or intention is within itself and not dependent upon the achievement of objectives outside the work such as the fact of its composition, the actuality it imitates, its author's stated intention, and of the effect it produces on its audience. This view of art is what has come to be termed art for art's sake. This paper looks at the tenet of art for art's sake in literature and how it greatly manifests itself in the language centered theories of literature which relates a work of art to the linguistic elements that make up such a work. It also looks at the effect of this tenet on the author as all extrinsic issues affecting a text no longer matter in its evaluation. The paper argues that since there are other theories and schools of criticism which still believe in extrinsic factors in the evaluation of a work of art, this has obliterated the total "death of the author".

**Keywords:** Art, Literature, Poetry, Linguistic, Extra-linguistic, art for art's sake

### INTRODUCTION

---

There is now such a profusion of theories and schools of thought that literary criticism can no longer be said to have a fixed centre or canons and procedure. Criticism is not exclusively academic, and often may be personal and subjective, though, it is of course capable of a detachment and rigour of its own just like scholarship hence, it is perfectly important that a critic has to be up to date with the latest theories in his field, if his work is to be credible (Irele, 1988:97). He goes further that "keeping up within theory serves for the critic therefore primarily as a means of maintaining his intellectual tone and sharpening his critical awareness. It

ought also to enable him in principle to exercise his judgment over a wider theoretical field and thus to be more discriminating in his application of critical ideas and methods.”

In fact, part of the excitement of studying literature lies in the exploration of different critical approaches and of the alternative ways of thinking about a literary work that they can generate. Critical theory, according to Thompson (2017),

is not, however, simply a subfield within social theory, philosophy, or the social sciences. It is a distinctive form of theory in that it posits a more comprehensive means to grasp social reality and diagnose social pathologies...It is a form of social criticism that contains within it the seeds of judgment, evaluation, and practical, transformative activity.

Abrams (1973:3), also posits that “A good critical theory, nevertheless, has its own kind of validity. The criterion is not the logical verifiability of its single propositions but the scope, precision, and coherence of the insights that it yields into the properties of single works of art and the adequacy with which it accounts for diverse kinds of art.”

Frye (1957:26) sees poetics as “rules of critical procedure, and law, in the sense of patterns of observed phenomena, of literary practice”. Goring, et al (2001:285) describe poetics as “the study of the theoretical principles governing literature generally or of a particular branch of literature.” They go further to state that the term is taken from Aristotle’s poetics.

From these definitions, one can see that poetics can be divided into groupings – those who regard it as ‘rules of critical procedure’ and those who see it as ‘the principles governing literature’. “It is therefore possible to postulate that poetics is of two varieties. These varieties are aesthetic poetics and critical poetics” (Afolayan 2008:27). Afolayan goes further to describe aesthetic poetics as that aspect of literary study whose interest is in the literary principles that build a work of art while the critical poetics are the set of rules that guide a critic in his evaluation of a text. Thus, a critic has to be at home with both varieties as the understanding of aesthetic poetics is useful in determining the appropriate literary theory to be used for evaluating a work of art.

Abrams (1973:4) in states that whatever the language of all critical theories, they discriminate four elements in the total situation of a work of art. These four elements are: the mimetic theory, the pragmatic theory, the expressive theory and the objective theory. The Mimetic Theory in literature is the explanation of art as essentially an imitation of aspects of the universe. The concept of art as imitation was carried beyond the Greek/Classical Age into the Neo-Classical Age. However,

during the Neo-Classical Age, there was the shift from art as just an imitation, to an imitation which is only geared towards producing effects upon the audience. This shift in emphasis is called the Pragmatic Theory. Throughout most of the eighteenth century, increasing attention was given to the mental make-up of the poet, the quality of his capacity and the effect of his genius in the act of composition. During this period, the stress was shifted more and more to the poet's natural genius and creative imagination. As a result, the audience gradually receded to the background, giving place to the poet himself and his emotional needs and make-up. This is called the Expressive Theory of Art.

### Art for Art's Sake

The fourth orientation is the Objective Theory in which attention shifts to the work of art as a self-sufficient entity constituted by its parts in their internal relations and sets out to judge a work solely by criteria embedded in its own mode of being. The orientation holds a literary work to be independent of the fact of its composition, the actuality it imitates, its author's stated intention, and of the effect it produces on its audience. Exponents of this school regard art as non-didactic, that is, one whose end-purpose or intention is within itself and not dependent upon the achievement of objectives outside the work. To them, a poem speaks its own truth in its own terms rather than referring its value to some external truth. Dhaval (2013) describes this theory as an attempt "to view the text in isolation." This view of art is what has come to be termed art for art's sake.

According to <http://www.britannica.com/.../art>, art for art's sake is a slogan translated from the French *l'art pour l'art*, which was coined in the early 19th century by the French philosopher Victor Cousin. The phrase expresses the belief held by many writers and artists, especially those associated with Aestheticism, that art needs no justification, that it need serve no political, didactic, or other end. Also, according to <https://www.theartstory.org.>, art for art's sake condenses the notion that art has its own value and should be judged apart from any theme which it might touch on, such as morality, religion, history or politics. It teaches that judgments of aesthetic value should not be confused with those proper to other spheres of life". The slogan expresses a philosophy that the intrinsic value of art and the only true art is divorced from any didactic, moral or utilitarian function.

The concept was adopted by some French, British and American writers and artists, especially proponents of aesthetics such as Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. It was a rejection of the accustomed utilitarian role of art as espoused by John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, that art strive some moral or useful purpose. Abrams (1953) points out that by the end of the eighteenth century, some critics "were undertaking to the concept of the poem as a 'heterocosm', a world of its own, independent of the world into which we are born, whose end is to instruct or please but simply to exist." One of the exponents of this school is Allen Poe. He argues in his essay "The Poetic Principles" (1850) that:

We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply is for the poem's sake...and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the poetic dignity and force:-but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake  
(<https://www.theartstory.org>.)

This orientation is also given prominence by T.S. Eliot in the dictum that "when we are considering poetry, we must consider it primarily as poetry" and that "to divert interest from the poet to poetry is a laudable aim" (Eliot 1973:22). He goes further that the poet has not a "personality, in which impression and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (Eliot: 1973:56). Landrow George also asserts that art should be "for the sake of beauty and its elevating effect" (<https://www.victorianweb.org>). Edward Owens contributes to this by stating that "art should be independent of any claptrap - should stand alone ... and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear without confronting this with emotions entirely foreign to it ..." (Smithsonian Magazine: 29).

One area in which art for art's sake has greatly manifested is the language centered theories of literature. The relationship between language and literature has engaged the attention of literary theorists for years. Since the late nineteenth century, it has become difficult for critics interested in the field of contemporary literature to ignore the issue of linguistic form. The linguistic principle relates a work of art to the linguistic elements that make up such a work. The application of language to the evaluation of a work of art gained a wider prominence after the postulation of the Swiss scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in his *Course de Linguistic Generale*. He differentiates between what he identified as 'langue' which means system of language and 'parole' which means our individual utterances. He says that no utterance can be identified by a speaker who lacks the language system that governs its meaning. He states further that "no literary utterance, no work of literature can be meaningful if we lack a sense of the literary system into which it fits" (Scholes 1974:14).

This postulation was further broadened by critics like Claude Levi-Straus and Roland Barthes who applied the concept to the study of literature. This approach to literature provides useful ways of discussing the specifically literary properties of texts. The adherents of linguistic principles believe that a text is not to be regarded as a collection of autonomous words but as an "order of words" (Frye 1957:17). Thus all

writings are assemblages of words and sentences by the writer to express his personal feelings hence the structural critic is always looking for the syntactic form in a literary piece.

One of the theories which also broadened the scope of structural criticism is Formalism. Goring (2001:143-144) explains that the term Formalism “is now frequently used very loosely to denote a view of literature which (i) excludes or downplays consideration of social, historical, and political or ideological issues, and (ii) looks at either the individual literary work, or a larger grouping of literary works such as genre, or literature in general as a closed or relatively closed system. The term also implies concern with formal-technical issues at the expense of matters of meaning or theme. Thus “It reduces the importance of a text’s historical, biographical and cultural context” (Amandeep, 2017).

Russian Formalism is one of the earliest attempts at putting literary studies on an independent footing and to make the study of literature an autonomous discipline. “It is a school of literary theory and analysis that emerged in Russia around 1915”(Birogu, 2018). Their main concern is not “how to study literature but what the subject matter of literary study actually is” (Jefferson and Robey, 1985:18). They are concerned with those specifics that differentiate literature from any other material. According to Jefferson, their operative concept is defamiliarization or making strange (*ostranenie*). Arts, they say, defamiliarizes things that have become habitual or automatic. Walking, for example, is an activity, which we have ceased to be aware of but when we dance, the automatically performed gestures of walking are perceived anew. Thus, a walk becomes a “dance which is constructed to be felt.”

In the same sense, the Formalists see practical language as what constitute the main element made strange by art. Everyday language is made strange in poetry and the physical sounds of words become prominent. Thus, poetic speech is formed speech, because, claims Shklovsky, “defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found” (Jefferson 1985:20). Thus for the Formalists, the business of literary studies is to analyze the differences implied in the opposition between practical and poetic language, relying on the concept of defamiliarization to bring those differences into focus.

The Formalists also believe that the subject of literary science is not literature but literariness, for the subject of literary studies is circumscribed on the basis of differentiation and not on that of inherent qualities. The possibility of literary devices losing their defamiliarizing capacity led to the distinction between device and function. According to Shyklovsky, “the defamiliarizing effect of a device does not depend on its existence as a device, but on its function in the work in which it appears” (Jefferson 1985:2). This is because the same device may be used for a variety of functions just as different devices may share a single function. Also, a given work will include passive and automatized elements which are subservient to the

“defamiliarizing” or “foregrounded elements”.

Tynyanov also introduced the concept of foregrounding as a necessary consequence of the view of the literary text as a system composed of interrelated and interacting elements, in order to distinguish between dominant and automatized factors. As Tynyanov put it, “since a system is not a free interplay of equal elements but presupposes the foregrounding of one group of elements (a dominant) and the deformation of others, a work becomes literatures and acquires its literary function through just this dominant” (Jefferson and Robey, 1982:22).

The semiotic version of the formalist position is what the Prague school understood by “structuralism” in the study of literature. According to (Robey 1985:46), it is worth emphasizing its major difference from the structuralism of the sixties and seventies. Whereas this later structuralism is mainly interested in the structure of literature as a whole, to the extent that this too can be viewed as a system of signs, the Prague school version took as its main object the structure of the individual text and like later formalists, views the individual text as a system.

The Prague School writers constitute a bridge between Russian Formalism and modern structuralism. The Prague school explained the difference between literary or poetic structure and non-literary structures through an extension of the Formalist concept of function, hence they define poetic texts as functional structure. Whereas the Formalist concept was related to the literary devices within a text, the Prague school applied it to all forms of language.

One of the Prague school theorists who made functions popular is Jan Mukarovsky. According to Mukarovsky, the function of poetic language is that of the maximum of foregrounding of utterance (Goring, et al 2001: 148). The best-known version of the theory of function is Roman Jakobson’s *Linguistics and Poetics*, which builds on Mukarovskys earlier propositions. According to Jakobson, any message can have six different functions, corresponding to the six factors necessarily present in any act of communication. These are: an addresser, an addressee, a context, a code, a means of contact and the message itself.

According to Jakobson, the focus on the addresser, for instance a speaker or an author, constitutes the emotive function; that of expressing the addresser’s attitudes or feelings. The focus on the addressee or receiver, the conative function, that of influencing the feelings or attitudes of the addressee, the focus on the context, the real, external situation in which the message occurs, the referential function, the focus on the codes, as when a message elucidates point of grammar, the metalingual function, the focus on the means of contact, as in case, say of expression inserted in one party into a telephone conversation simply in order to reassure the other party

that they are both still on the line, the phatic, the focus on the message itself, the poetic function. The advantage of the concept of function is that “it avoids absolute distinctions between one kind of text and another” (Robey 1985:44). If the poetic function is dominant, then the message can be described as poetic, aesthetic, literary or artistic.

Jacobson also insists that the difference between poetic and non-poetic text can be explained in purely linguistic terms. He says that poetics, which deals primarily with the question “what makes a verbal message a work of art?” is an integral part of linguistics because the answer to this can be found in the verbal structure of the message.

After Structuralism, came Post-Structuralism. Deconstruction is generally taken to represent an important – even dominant element – in Post-Structuralism. Deconstruction is best described as a movement rather than a school. Its name originates in the writings of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida. To Derrida, the interpretation of a text can never arrive at a final and complete “meaning” for a text. Texts are not to be read according to a hermeneutical or exegetical method, which would seek out a finished “signified” beneath a textual surface. Each act of reading is transformational. “Thus, for Derrida the meaning of a text is always unfolding just ahead of the interpreter, unrolling in front of him or her like a never-ending carpet whose final edge never, reveals itself” (Goring, et al 2001:172-173). Deconstruction features the text as an ‘active object’, the author is no longer seen as the source of meaning, and thus “is guilty of being an accessory after the fact with regard to the ‘death’ of the author” (Goring, et al 2001: 173), Yewah (1994:64) states that in a 1987 interview, Jacques Derrida explains that deconstruction, used as a French word, means not ‘destroying’ but ‘undoing’, while analyzing the different layers of a structure to know how it has been built. Everything which is not natural, he continues, has a structure, and has been built; and deconstruction is to some extent, a way of analyzing the structure. Apart from Derrida, other notable proponents of post-structuralism are Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

The other strand of Formalism is New Criticism. New Criticism reached fruition with the works of I.A Richards; F.R Leavis; William Empson, in England and J.C Ransom; Cleanth Brooks; W.K Wimsatt; M.C Beardsley;, Robert Warren; Allen Tate; Yvor Winters and Kenneth Burke, in America. These critics also appeared to be inspired by Eliot. Ransom, one of the major proponents, asks for criticism to be more exact and scientific and highlights the fact that literary criticism should be a specialized discipline. He then lays down six things which should be divorced from the study of literary criticism – personal registration, synopsis and paraphrase, historical studies, linguistic studies, moral studies and other specialized studies.

William Wimsatt. Jn. (1907-1975) and Monroe Curtis Beardsley, (1915-1985) also

proponents of New Criticism, made propositions in their phenomenal essays "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy". In "The Intentional Fallacy", they posited that the very essence of a poem is in its existence which by itself is self-sufficient and that we should not try to locate what was the intention of the poet. In "Affective Fallacy", they state that a poem should not be judged by the emotional effect it produces on the readers.

### **Art for Art's Sake: Death of the Author?**

Since the advent of the Objective Theory of literature, its major principle has been to devolve literature from extraneous issues which are not intrinsic in the text. Total adherence to this theory would have signaled the death of the author as the author's emotion, milieu, race, and issue affecting his society, which might have influenced his art, would be secondary issues. Some critics have come out to oppose this approach to criticism. The Marxist critics oppose all kinds of literary formalism and other technical properties which rob literature of historical significance and reducing it totally to an aesthetic game. They believe "that all artistic forms are socially conditioned" (Sutton. et al 1967:4). Historical Determinists argue for the exploration of the author, his race and the social condition that might have influenced the author in his art. The Psychoanalysts relate literature to the author's mind. For the Phenomenologist, they believe that literature should be evaluated from two ways – the author and the reader. One of the protagonists of the theory, Wolfgang Iser, believes that in the evaluation of any literary work, "one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the action involved in responding to the text" (Lodge 1993: 212). Thus he advises critics that

A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative (Lodge, 1993:213).

This view is buttressed by Jean Paul Satre in *Why Write?* that:

...the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected activities necessitate two distinct agents. It is the conjoint effect of author and reader which brings upon the scene the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the minds (Lodge, 1973:370).

Though the American New Critics like I.A Richards, Crowe Ransom, W.K. Wimsatt. Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate, belong to the Formalist School, their interest in meaning and vision, the reader's response and the evaluation of this response necessitates the continued existence of the author as they assume that the mental condition which the critic/reader must recreate within himself is also the mental condition of the author.



In the 20th century, there is an increasing preponderance towards what is now termed art for life's sake in which functionality was brought back to art. According to Rajarao et al (2015), "in the modern age, a number of writers rejected the doctrine of 'art for art's sake'. They developed the new literacy creed of 'art for life's sake' or at least, for the sake of the community". According to Petry Ann (1996), art is a form of self-expression. Many use it as a way of expressing a range of feelings and emotions from turmoil to happiness or exasperation – feelings that every person has within their souls. She adds that in America, to write for life's sake, black writers must be conscious of the issues that surround them. "The humble facts of history such as slavery, Jim Crows Laws and oppression have forced artists to create "art for life's sake". She states further that a "conscious novelist is merely a man or woman with conscience. ...He must also write about abuses, lifestyles, and everything in between."

Coming down to Africa, most African critics do not believe in art for art's sake; as they opined that the experiences of Africans dominate African artistic works and evaluating them at the level of language and techniques will not do justice to them. According to Senghor, "art is functional and in black Africa, art for art's sake does not exist" (<http://www.artandpopularculture.com.>) Achebe (1975:19) is more scathing in his criticism when he asserts that "art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorized dog shit."

## CONCLUSIONS

---

With these different biases, the study of literature in the 21st century continues to be approached from two different angles – the intrinsic and the extrinsic. While some demanded that art should only focus on aesthetics (and be devoid of morality and the like), others such as the famous writer, George Sand, said "Talent imposes duties. Art for the truth, art for the good, art for the beautiful – that is the religion I seek" (<https://www.theartstory.org.>) Many artists set out to write about life, about society and about reality. It is this reality which translates to the artistic form. Thus content and the formal aspects of art exist side by side. Art should not just exist for art sake; it should be a mirror of life. This has obliterated the total "death of the author".

## REFERENCES

---

- Abrams M.H. (1953). *The Mirror and the Lamb*. London: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1973). Orientation of critical theories. In David Lodge (ed) *20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Criticism*. London: Longman, pp. 1-26.
- Achebe, C. (1975). *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. Michigan: Heinemann Educational Books.

- Afolayan, O. S. (2008). Towards the poetics of the African novel. An unpublished Ph.D Thesis. Ado-Ekiti: University of Ado-Ekiti.
- Amandeep, R. (2017). Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, Post- Structuralism & Deconstruction. <https://www.jcdavdasuya.com>. Accessed on July, 6, 2020.
- Birogu, E. (2018). Russian Formalism. <https://researchgate.net> Accessed on July, 7, 2020.
- Dhaval, P. (2013). Four Ccritical theories from the points of M.H. Abrams. <https://researchgate.net> Accessed on July, 7, 2020.
- Edward, O. "Art for art's sake" in Smithsonian Magazine: 29. Accessed August 8, 2019 from <http://en.m.wikipedia.org>.
- Derrida. J. (1987). An interview with Derrida. In *Criticism in Society*, 164, Imre Saluzinsky (ed). New York: Methuen.
- Eliot, T. S. (1973). Tradition and individual talent. In Frank Kermode *et al* (eds) *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, Vol II. London: Oxford University Press.
- Frye, N. (1957). *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. London: Penguin Books.
- (1973). "The Archetypes of Literature" in David Lodge (ed) *20<sup>th</sup> Century Literary Criticism*. London: Longman, pp. 422-433.
- Goring, P., Hawthorn, J., & Mitchell, D. (2001). *Studying Literature: The Essential Companion, London; Arnold*.
- Irele, A. (1988). Literary criticism in the Nigerian context. In Yemi Ogunbiyi (ed) *Perspectives on Nigeria Literature: 1700 to the Present*. Vol. I. Lagos: Guardian Books. Pp. 93-110.
- Art for art's sake. "(<http://www.artandpopularculture.com>.) Accessed July,10, 2020
- Art for art's sake. <https://www.theartstory.org>. Accessed February,16,2020.
- Art for arts' sake-New World Encyclopedia. <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org>
- Art for art's sake/Britannica.<https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed February,15,2020.
- Art for Life's Sake: A Reflection of African American Literature. <https://russiarobinson-wordpress.com.postedNovember11,2013>. Accessed February,15,2020.

- Jefferson, A. (1985). Russian formalism. In Ann Jefferson and Robey, David (eds) *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. London: Batsford Academic and Education Books, pp. 16-37.
- Landrow, G. Art for art's sake. <http://www.victorianwed.org>. Accessed May 28, 2019.
- Lodge, D. (1973). *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. Essex: Longman.
- Petry, A. (1996). The novel as social criticism. In *African and African American Literature*. BLS 411 ed. Tsuruta. New York: All Young, Harper Collins College Publishers.
- Rajaraos, G., & Sriviness, V. (2015). Art for life's sake. *International Journal Online of Humanities*, 1,(2)
- Robey. D. (1985). Modern linguistic and language of literature. In Ann Jefferson and Robey, David (eds) *Modern Literary Theory*: London: Batsford Academic and Educational Books. pp. 38-64.
- Scholes. R. (1974). *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction*. London: Yale University.
- Sutton, W. & R. Foster, (1963). *Modern Criticism: Theory and Practice*. New York: The Odyssey Press.
- Thompson, M.J. (2017). Introduction: What is Critical Theory? <https://researchgate.net> Accessed on July, 7, 2020.
- Yewah, E. (1994). Multiple witnesses. multiple stories: subversion of the storytelling-interpretation process in court trials in Eldred D. Jones (ed) *African Literature Today*; Vol. 19. pp.64-83.