



## STRUCTURALIST AND POST-STRUCTURALIST ATTITUDE OF ROLAND BARTHES AS EXPRESSED IN HIS *S/Z* AND *THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR*

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### Abstract

Roland Barthes' standpoint in the field of literary theory is one of the most discussed issues among the students and teachers of English literature and other related branches of study. He may be seen both as a structuralist and a post-structuralist. The basis of my discussion in this article are two famous works of Barthes – *S/Z* (1970) and *The Death of the Author* (1967). Though *The Death of the Author* was published a little prior to *S/Z*, the thoughts and ideas expressed in these two works are somehow contradictory if we see Barthes as a literary theorist. In *The Death of the Author* Barthes denies the importance of the author on the way to understand a text, while in *S/Z* he focuses on a 'code based' structure for the same purpose. This difference may be because of the time, which was a period of transition from structuralism to post-structuralism. So, these two works of Barthes can be regarded as important documents as far as Barthes' theoretical ideas are concerned. In this article I have tried show the different attitudes of Barthes in these two works about how to read and understand a literary text.

**Keywords:** Structure, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Deconstruction, Semiotics, Free Play etc.

### Introduction

Theoretical development of Roland Barthes (1915-1980) is often seen as an embodiment of transition from structuralism to post-structuralism. Barthes was a literary theorist, philosopher, semiotician who used to apply structural methods to the general field of modern culture. He draws on Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of semiotics i.e. the science of the way signs behave within society. Instances are many to show Barthes' high structuralist notion. Among which his book named *S/Z* (1970) presents a structural analysis of *Sarrasine*, the short story by Honoré de Balzac. The ideas of Barthes expressed in *S/Z* can be called an expression

of his structuralist attitude in terms of reading texts in which he focuses on the 'structure' based reading and interpretation of a literary text. Moreover, Barthes structuralist ideas and attitude also gets emphasis in his works such as *Mythologies* (a collection of essays, published in 1957), *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) etc. But, on the other hand, we can see his post-structuralist attitude in his famous and most debated treatise *The Death of the Author*. The thoughts and ideas he expressed in this treatise goes hand in hand with the ideas of the deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida. Barthes ideas in this works can be seen as a celebration of the demise of the author and birth of the reader, which according to Barthes gives a new dimension to

understand a literary text. Thus, Roland Barthes can be counted among both the structuralists and the post-structuralist if we go through the thoughts and ideas he expressed in his writings. Barthes' attitude as both a structuralist and a post-structuralist can be discussed as follows depending on his two famous works.

#### **Structuralist ideas of Barthes as expressed in *S/Z*:**

Structuralism is an intellectual movement which began in France in 1950. Though it can not be defined in a single line, yet to be precise we can simply say that structuralism or structuralist approach of literature leads us to interpret the things from the context of a 'structure'. The essence of structuralism is to believe that things can not be understood in isolation. Rather, they have to be seen in the context of a larger structure of which they are parts. Thus, structuralist approach of reading a literary work somehow deviates us from the content or the text as this approach has a movement away from the interpretation of the individual literary work and a parallel drive towards the larger and abstract structure which contains them. This abstract structure may be the question of historical or socio-political background, genre, narrative structure, writer's personal life, his philosophy etc.

In this context of our understanding about structuralism, we can refer to Roland Barthes' famous work *S/Z* (1970). This book of Barthes is actually an analysis of French novelist Honoré de Balzac's novella *Sarrasine* (1830). Barthes method of analysis is to divide the story into 561 lexis or units of meaning, which he then classifies with five 'codes', seeing these as the basic underlying 'structures' of all narratives. These codes are:

- I) *The proairetic code*: This code provides indications of actions.
- II) *The hermeneutic code*: This code poses questions or enigmas in reader's mind which provide narrative suspense.
- III) *The cultural code*: This code contains references out beyond the text to what is regarded as common knowledge or stereotype.

IV) *The semic or connotative code*: This code refers to the connotation within the story that gives an additional meaning.

V) *The symbolic code*: This code refers to the symbolism within a text. It is done in the use of antithesis, where new meaning arises out of contrasting ideas.

So, in terms of our general perception about structuralism i.e. it aims to understand individual literary work by placing it in the context of larger structure to which it belongs, the individual literary work here is the particular story, and the larger structure is the system of codes which is abstract in comparison to the story. Barthes sees these codes as generating all possible narratives, just as the grammatical structures of a language can be seen as generating all possible sentences which can be written or spoken in it. Here, in *S/Z* Barthes' strong emphasis on the importance of a 'structure' on the way of his interpretation of the literary text is clearly visible. Not only that, he tries to establish this 'code based structure' as a generator of all possible narratives.

Thus, by reading such thoughts or ideas of Roland Barthes as expressed in *S/Z*, we can call him a structuralist. But, this very work *S/Z*, which is an important document of Barthes' theoretical ideas can also be seen as 'sittings on the fences' of Barthes' transition from structuralism to post-structuralism. Because, Barthes famous treatise *The Death of the Author* was published in 1967 prior to *S/Z* in which Barthes clearly shows his position as a post-structuralist by mentioning the 'death' or absence of an author to understand a text.

#### **Barthes' post-structuralist attitude as expressed in *The Death of the Author*:**

As the name suggests, post-structuralism that comes after structuralism is a theoretical approach built upon the idea of structuralism and it rejects the ideas of structuralism in many cases. It may be called as a theoretical response to structuralism up to some extent. The post-structuralist thoughts basically emerged in the late 1960s. Roland Barthes was closely associated with this emergence along with Jacques Derrida (1930-

2004). The post-structuralists discard the very idea of interpretation of a literary text (or the world in larger context) by depending on a pre-established structure. Hence, they bring the concept of 'deconstruction'. Unlike structuralists, post-structuralists prefers to read or understand a particular literary text by depending on the text alone. They debunked the very idea of a larger structure like the social background, author, history, genre or any such pre-established 'structure' of reading on the way to understand a text.

Keeping all these general ideas about post-structuralism in mind, we can place Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* as an example of his post-structuralist thoughts. Moreover, in many books it is referred as an evidence of Barthes' post-structuralist thoughts. *The Death of the Author* can be called the 'hinge' around which Barthes turns from structuralism to post-structuralism. Published in 1967, this treatise of Roland Barthes attracts immense attention as well as criticism by announcing the 'death' of the author, which is a rhetorical way of asserting textual independence. Barthes argues against the method of understanding a text relying upon the aspects of the author's identity. Barthes' point is that to give a text an author is equal add limitations to a text. According to him, reader should separate a text from its author and they should read the text alone, because it contains multiple layers of meaning. By 'death' he refers to the absence of the author which can guarantee the freedom of a literary text. The text is free by its nature of all such restraints. Barthes in this essay says that the corollary death of the author is the birth of the reader. In the absence of the author, the claim to decipher a text becomes futile. From our reading of Barthes' *The Death of the Author* we can clearly trace Barthes' post-structuralists attitude in which he prefers a kind of 'free play' of meanings in a text. It resembles to the deconstructionist ideas of Derrida who prefers a 'decentred' universe through his writings. In his lecture on "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" Derrida opines that instead of movement or deviation from a known centre, all we have is 'free play' just as Barthes in *The Death of the Author* celebrates the demise of the author as ushering in a era of joyous

freedom. Concerning all these things we can say that Barthes' identity as post-structuralist and his deconstructionist ideas emerged through his essay *The Death of the Author*.

### Analysis

After this discussion on the main aspects of Barthes' two famous works - *S/Z* and *The Death of the Author*, we can clearly state that the ideas expressed in these works are not similar. In *S/Z*, in his analysis of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes clearly proposed to read such texts depending on a structure. He gives five codes in that case and says that these codes are the basic underlying structures of all narratives. Thus, he tried to establish such codes as the major guiding principles in terms of interpretation of any literary texts. He thus proves his position as a structuralist. But, in 1967 in his essay *The Death of the Author* he had already proved himself to be a post-structuralist by nullifying the importance of the author in terms of reading a literary text. Barthes' *The Death of the Author* is regarded as a document of his post-structuralist thoughts. As a post-structuralist, though he emphasises on the immense freedom of a literary text, it somehow creates a little contradiction to his own ideas expressed in *S/Z*. This is because of the time of writing which was a juncture of structuralism and post-structuralism. And for that reason we can call Barthes as both a structuralist and a post-structuralist basing on these two famous works that discussed above.

### Conclusion

To conclude this discussion we can say that Roland Barthes was such an important figure in the field of literary theory and criticism whose thoughts and writings were largely impacted by these two schools of thoughts, structuralism and post-structuralism. This is the reason for which his thoughts have similarities with both Saussure and Derrida. As a structuralist he followed Saussure's idea of semiotics and more than that he emphasised on a kind of 'code based' structure in *S/Z*. But, in his previous work *The Death of the Author* he had already showed his post-structuralist attitude by announcing death of the author. In some books of literary theory Barthes is counted among

structuralists, while in some books he is counted among the post-structuralists and some calls him both. And it is resulted from his transition from structuralism to post-structuralism. In this regard, these two books *S/Z* and *The Death of the Author* plays a vital role to help the readers of Roland Barthes to learn the ideas and thoughts of this great contributor of literary theory more closely.

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