

The Horrific Death and Artistic Rebirth of Author Anne Frank

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Literary Theory

“The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.”

- Tim Keller

There is a horrible reality of sin in our hearts. The Holocaust revealed the oppressive evil present within each of our souls. 13-year-old Anne Frank was a victim of the Holocaust. However, thanks to her personal diary, the perspective of childish innocence is preserved amidst a horrific world. By considering the arguments of literary theorists Roland Barthes and Zizek, I aim to deepen my understanding of my responsibility as an artist, educate, and inspire empathy in audiences while performing Michael Tilson Thomas' adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Literary theorist Roland Barthes radically reframes the role of a reader in his paper “Death of an Author.” Barthes argues that the text itself does not carry any intrinsic value, and authorial intention is irrelevant. Instead, it is the reader who creates meaning and imbues the text with significance. Barthes theory makes all literature more accessible, empowering the reader. If a reader does not require any background knowledge about the author, they can begin digesting the content with no prior information. According to Barthes, the reader places their opinions on the text, and therefore, produces the meaning of the text. The author is null; ergo “Death of an Author.” Barthes distinguishes the author from “modern scriptor” by saying

“The author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation, and every text is eternally written here and now.”

(Barthes 1270)

He claims that rather than an author being like a parent to their text, they are more like a co-collaborator. But in this collaboration, once published, the scriptor's contribution is null.

Barthes also argues that the modern scriptor mentality is beneficial for an author, as there is no longer the pressure of perfecting and polishing the work. If the work itself carries no meaning, then the modern scriptor is encouraged to produce without fear of being incoherent.

Barthes's argument raises many issues. Is meaning inherent to the text or do we retrieve and recover meaning? If the text does not carry meaning, and we extract it as readers, what does that imply regarding the sovereignty of the author in their text? Do people construct objective or subjective meaning? Do privileged readers with greater cultural capital construct the most important meaning? Is every reader equally valuable? Is knowledge more accessible? In Barthes' model, prior knowledge is not required, but there is an immediate risk of abusing this power. Parameters are set by the text, and it can be easy to manipulate Barthes' argument so as to read while rejecting them. Likewise, to ignore the author completely is to miss a part of the story. Though an author should be able to include everything they hope to within the piece itself, effective art should inspire questions, questions that can be pursued through the context of an author. Ignoring the role of an author, or allowing them to effectively “die,” often results in the interpretative censorship of readers.¹

Anthropologist Levi Strauss also considers the question: Is written language intellectual or sociological? His conclusion implies a different responsibility than Barthes's. By claiming that context is unimportant and meaning is made by the reader, Barthes argues that writing is more sociological than intellectual. As an anthropologist, Strauss's research looks at a humanistic perspective of language and explores meaning. Strauss's holds the tension of the exploration and

¹ Granted my perspective comes from a voice of educational privilege, where I have had the opportunity to understand authorial context for most books I read.

weight of meaning in tension. “His skill as a narrator is to make the reader feel that a great deal is not being understood and at the same time all of human life is at stake” (Simon 1222). In Strauss’s writings, the reader is actively aware of their lack of cultural context. In this way, they are motivated to seek out others through understanding context. Closing that gap (being able to empathize with each other) is crucial for human development. Unlike Barthes, who gives all of the power to the reader, Strauss is focused on revealing the gap between the reader and the context of what he writes. Because we are unable to transfer all communication in writing, Strauss encourages the reader toward a posture of curiosity, to investigate other cultures so that we may become more empathetic people.

Another aspect of Barthes's argument that I take issue with is his perspective on enunciation. He says, “leaving aside literature itself, linguistics has recently provided the destruction of the author with a valuable analytical tool by showing that the whole of enunciation is an empty process, functioning perfectly without there being any need for it to be filled with the person of the interlocutors” (Barthes 1272). Barthes suggests that neither the text, nor the author, nor a middleman, is necessary for comprehension. In this way, he prioritizes the reader because there are no barriers to entry. For Barthes, it is the reader who determines meaning, not the author. Barthes is following a post-structuralist mindset (such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault) that argues that enunciation is empty. As an actress, I cannot agree with Barthes's argument. Actor and author share an authoritative role in a text. While the author provides the words, an actor adds a researched and founded interpretation of the text. The author shapes words, the actor makes word flesh. The rhetoric of spoken word adds significant meaning to a text. The way that an actor chooses to speak and perform a person’s story adds depth, meaning, and interpretation. Granted, an individual provides their unique perspective regarding the text.

Nevertheless, this perspective is typically well-informed because of the research aspect of the performing process. The very act of speaking or hearing speech provides context for opinion and belief.

Psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek created a theory that, when paired with “Death of an Author,” amends and enlightens some of its issues. Žižek’s concept is titled “The Horror of the Real.” In this, he argues that what is on the surface, what we all see, is not actually true at all. Instead, that which is hidden beneath is a reality so horrible that humans could never fully comprehend it. He writes:

“[T]he 'true' action is repressed, internalized, subjectivized, presented in the form of the subject's desires, hallucinations, suspicions, obsessions, feelings of guilt. What we actually see becomes nothing but a deceptive surface beneath which swims an undergrowth of perverse and obscene implications, the domain of what is prohibited. The more we find ourselves in total ambiguity, not knowing where reality ends and hallucination (desire) begins, the more menacing this domain appears” (Žižek 2227).

Žižek seems to be considering the idea that these true desires (that are perverse) are shoved down deep into the unconscious. The real is an impossible, dramatic, traumatic, violent core of reality. So what we see in this world is all false; the true self is unseen. Plato discusses this concept in his allegory of the cave. “According to Plato, mankind is neither able to understand truth nor to perceive reality; it is caught in a mode of existence in which it takes replicas (simulacra) for originals (the real)” (Lacan 22). People operate within the illusions of their ideology, without questioning what is deeper.

This horror is even more applicable to times of war. Žižek is particularly interested in how the media interacts with and fantasizes about horror. He writes

“When we hear how the bombings were a totally unexpected shock, how the unimaginable impossible happened, one should recall the other defining catastrophe from the beginning of the XXth century, that of Titanic: it was also a shock, but the space for it was already prepared in ideological fantasizing, since Titanic was the symbol of the might of the XIXth century industrial civilization. Does the same not hold also for these bombings? Not only were the media bombarding us all the time with the talk about the terrorist threat, but this threat was also obviously libidinally invested - just recall the series of movies from *Escape From New York* to *Independence Day*. Therein resides the rationale of the often-mentioned association of the attacks with the Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and this was the greatest surprise” (Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert*, pg 3).

The core of this is that “the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy.” This is why horror is so interesting, because it depicts a partial truth of that which is deeper. That uncanny place delights viewers. It satiates the audience's longings to experience something deeper, without ever actually experiencing reality. It makes a mockery of truth. It is a brief catharsis that satisfies enough to ignore the true longing for more. In times of plenty, we create art that fantasizes the horrible. I believe our culture is numb to horror. Horror films pervert and promote what is hidden. The tragedy of this is that by normalizing horror, we reduce the actual depth of the tragedy of our existence. In this way, we are unable to actually experience true horror, but we laugh it off and pretend it is not of the utmost seriousness and importance.

In actuality, the horror of life is that everything points to death. I agree with Zizek’s argument because we are inherently sinful. In Ephesians 2:1, Paul says, “And you were dead in the trespasses for which you once walked. Following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among

whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, we are all born into our sin: dead in our horror. As Michael Fuchs argues, “the possible lack of a difference between ‘reality’ and fiction is ‘our collective nightmare’” (Fuchs, 89). As humans fictivize a horrific reality in order to make it more palatable, we mock and lessen the truth. I adore how Tim Keller phrases our human condition: “The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope” (Keller). We are in a state more horrible than we could ever imagine. Yet even in the depth and severity of our sin, God loved us. God sees the full extent of horror, and here, based on no merit of our own, he sends his son to die on our behalf that we may have eternal life with him. By using media to numb ourselves to horror, we miss the depth of grace and mercy God has for us.

Ultimately, that which is real is too terrible for us to grasp. So how can humans consider truth if it is too traumatic for us to experience? How can we understand reality outside of ideology? We do this through art. Art is an effective tool for considering truth veiled. It illuminates elements of true horror without incomprehensible trauma. By this, Zizek’s horror of the real offers a helpful amendment to “Death of an Author.” If indeed the real author cannot be fully known or understood (which is true because a person can never fully know another person), then making a realistic artistic embodiment of the author is an effective tool to make truths more legible to an audience. Readers cannot access the real author, so (in light of Horror of the real) we must create a “false” author, an ideology (or mask), in order for us to understand the true author more fully. Just like we cannot see God, the author, we must make reflections of aspects of his being so that we can understand him more fully in fragments. By creating a reliable voice

(or artistic author) who speaks truth about the real author, we create an artistic mirror through which to view and critique truth. The horror becomes more digestible. Truth is greater than reality.

This February, Concordia University Irvine will put on a production of Michael Tilson Thomas's orchestration of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. As I approach Anne Frank, I will equip both Barthes' and Zizek's theories. Thereby, I may become an artistic manifestation of the author, so as to reveal aspects of horrific truth.

Anne Frank, a Jewish girl, was born on June 12, 1929, in Frankfurt, Germany. Early in the regime of Adolf Hitler, the Frank family moved to Amsterdam, in hopes of escaping the cruelty of the Nazi party. Tragically, even in Amsterdam, they were not safe, and in 1941, German forces invaded and occupied the Netherlands. From this point, life became stressful for the Frank family. On June 12, 1942- Anne's 13th birthday- she received a diary. After just a month, on July 6th, 1942, the Frank family went into hiding in the annex of Otto Frank's business office (Berenbaum par 1-2). Anne's diary quickly became an escape from a horrific world. On August 4th, 1944 (after 2 years of hiding), the annex was discovered by the Gestapo, and the Franks were sent to Westerbork. Anne and her sister Margot were separated from their family and sent to Bergen-Belsen, where they died from typhus just weeks before the camp was liberated (Berenbaum par 4). On June 25th, 1947, Otto Frank, after much persuading, allowed a colleague to publish Anne's writings, and so Anne's works were posthumously released.

Anne's writings inspired and educated people worldwide. One such person is composer Michael Tilson Thomas. In 1989, he created a piece using excerpts of Anne's Diary spoken by a narrator with a full orchestra playing the musical setting of her words. Thomas describes his piece as four separate sections.

“The first introduces Anne’s first theme. This is developed as a dance which leads to the narrator’s first words, Anne’s dedication on the first page of her diary... Simpler and simpler harmonies lead to a new theme, that of her imaginary friend Kitty, to whom the diary is addressed... The second section opens with opposing major and minor harmonies that entrap the themes within a twelve-tone game. Playful at first, the games become increasingly menacing, until the whole orchestra is raging. The tumult subsides as the family goes into hiding. The lullaby returns now, first as an elegiac bass trombone solo, then as a tragic procession... The third section takes up Anne’s love of nature and her discovery of love. It is a series of up-tempo variations on Anne’s and Kitty’s themes, finally uniting them. The fourth section serves as an epilogue to the diary. We hear Anne’s vision for her future, and the world’s” (Thomas).

Thomas manages to capture Anne’s heart through the embodiment of the orchestra. Through his composing and shaping he manages to weave a musical narrative that becomes the essence of Anne’s internal narrative as well as the chaos of the world.

Dr. Jeff Held, the head of the orchestra department at Concordia University Irvine, chose to include this piece within CUI’s 2025-2026 music season. I am honored to have the opportunity to create this story as Anne Frank, under the direction of Dr. Held and Professor Lori Siekmann. Our production will differ from Thomas’ initial composition in our staging, use of interludes, prelude, and epilogue. Unlike a traditional concert setting, we will transform Zhang Hall into the annex. As the narrator, I will not only be reading the piece- but will become Anne, and speak the lines from memory. We will also differ by adding the following: a violinist prelude, *Rememberances*. The 1st interlude (placed between parts 1&2) “For I will Consider My Cat, Joffrey” (Benjamin Britten on a text by Christopher Smart (Jubilate Agno), 2nd interlude (between 2&3) Fugue in G Minor (K.30) “Cat’s Fugue” (Domenico Scarlatti), 3rd interlude (within part 4) Now the Light has Gone Away vs 1/3/5, and a cellist postlude Elegy by John

Williams. By splitting up the piece, we are choosing to emphasize certain aspects of Anne Frank's story, and by using "Now the Light Has Gone Away," we are adding a prayer for hope amidst the darkness.

As an artist, I strive to tell stories that illuminate truth. How do these theories enlighten the way audiences consider Anne Frank? How do these theories animate the way I embody Anne? By having the opportunity to portray the true story of a young girl's life, it is of the utmost importance that I honor and esteem her voice and create an accurate artistic representation of her. I can only do this well by trying to understand as much as possible about her life and the cultural context in which she lived. The horror of the Holocaust is too great to be understood. A modern audience cannot comprehend what World War II actually felt like. However, it is imperative that modern audiences attempt to understand. This attempt at understanding is what separates the empathetic from the callous. People need to consider truth through story so it is both legible and digestible. Anne's diary can't just be a diary; it must be art. The endeavor of creating stories (or an ideological mask, as Zizek would understand it) is altogether good. For it is through the package and lens of story that we understand truth. Through my diligent approach to Anne's historical background, I will be able to reveal aspects of horrible truth to our audience in a digestible but honest way.

In order to create a realistic artistic presentation of Anne, I must wrestle with Barthes "Death of an Author" in light of Anne's diary. While not generally sympathetic towards "Death of an Author," I agree that an effective artist will place in their work everything the reader needs to know. But, in the case of Anne, she did not write her diary with the intention of publication. These are simply her inner musings. Because her personal work, not written for an audience, was published posthumously, should this work be approached with Barthes' critical eye? Or should it

be approached uniquely? By looking at the context of our author, Anne, research proves that she edited parts of her diary and utilized pseudonyms in parts of her work. Both of these lend scholars to believe that Anne was interested in publishing at least parts of her diary after the war (Giles). Due to Anne's fascination with Hollywood fame, I think she would be delighted to know that her diary did indeed make her famous.

To ignore the author is to engage in interpretive censorship and miss a part of the story. In the case of Anne Frank, it is crucial that audiences consider and research the context of the culture she was writing in. As an artist, it is my responsibility to understand the history of the Holocaust and examine it from as many different perspectives as possible in order to make well-educated conclusions regarding how I choose to creatively present her life.

A text offers truth (inherent meaning) while the reader creates application. The reader consumes, interprets, and applies what is given to them. All of these stages are imbued with meaning; a meaning most profoundly applied when understood within the context of the author. Once a work is published, it is no longer an author's job to control or babysit it. They are dead to a reader. But this death does not change the value of a reader learning about the cultural context of the author. Anne Frank's metaphorical death does not lessen my curiosity or my responsibility to grasp the greater picture of her life. Anne Frank's literal death should compel me all the more to understand and research her as best as I possibly can. By attending an interview with a Holocaust survivor, and reading books about her life, such as *The Betrayal of Anne Frank*, *Anne Frank Remembered*, *When We Flew Away*, and, of course, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I am developing a truthful foundation on which to develop my artistic interpretation of the author.

By producing this orchestrated piece, we have the opportunity to make Anne's work more accessible to a wider audience. Ultimately, this is the goal of Barthes' work: to make text more

accessible and applicable for the reader. As collaborative artists, we are effectively doing the hard work of contextualizing ourselves into Anne's cultural setting. By doing this, the audience may just enter and receive it. They do not have to do anything except take it in and experience what the annex would have been like for Anne. The goal is not to make it about us- the middleman- the goal is that we give audiences the opportunity to experience what life might have been like for Anne. We are achieving this clarity through the simplicity of the set we are building and the straightforward way we are staging it. It will be set in a semi-circle, making the audience feel more condensed and a part of a community together. As I portray her, I hope to be a vessel for her words. Not adding extraneous choices based on artistic flourishes. Rather, I want to be as honest, grounded, and realistic about who Anne was as possible.

By creating an artistic interpretation of the author, I am then able to present a fragment of the horrible real. Kharálampos Goyós analyzes the unique method of learning by spoken enunciation. "When thought is spoken aloud, its impact is radically demystified, losing as it does, in principle, the seductive, ideologically charged depersonalization and authoritative facelessness that grant printed media their (still current) authority. This loss is obviously compensated by the addition of a performative dimension to the process and presentation of thought — to the pure dimension of meaning is added the "unclean" dimension of voice and its "grain", mark of a desiring, embodied subjectivity" (Goyos, 235). Goyos argues that speaking creates interpretive meaning in a text, which forces it to be understood within more specific boundaries. But Goyos goes on to explain how voice, text, and music, when coupled together, create an important addition of meaning. He says

"If, in the domain of philosophical discourse, meaning and voice can thus sometimes appear as antagonistic agents, this is obviously not the case in the domain of psychoanalysis, with its rich tradition of assigning meaning to the voice act itself. From my (musician's) point of view, I see

the psychoanalytic process as providing a distinct analogy to the art of operatic composition, as well as to the manner that, in my opinion at least, successful operas articulate the relationship of meaning to sound through their respective agents, namely words and music, as expounded through the embodied subjectivity of an abstract, “transcendent” character incarnated in the concrete, contingent performer... Thus, in an operatic piece, both concrete and abstract types of meaning-making may coexist, mirror, complement, contradict, or, in the best cases, asymptotically illuminate each other through the very tension that exists between them” (Goyos, 236).

By creatively exploring *The Diary of Anne Frank* through both music and her words, we create both abstract and concrete methods of meaning-making. Our bare set will give audiences the space to fill in the gaps, to create independent meaning regarding the world around Anne. In the show, we will only present Anne’s words. The orchestra suggests the atmosphere around Anne without ever actually depicting it. Dramatist Anne Bogart says, “What is not shown on stage is often more important than what is shown on stage. There should be breathing space, imaginative space and associative space for the audience's creative participation with what is happening onstage” (Bogart 44). In creating breathing space, audiences will be able to visualize the dire nature of Anne’s situation more vividly and personally than we could do on stage. In so doing, truth is revealed and prodded at through our artistic window. By placing a horrific reality in a protected, controlled, and safe artistic context, audiences will have the opportunity to further understand the true horror of Anne’s experience, without having to touch horror themselves.

By using art as a window into a horrific reality, I am able to create a truthful artistic author that will educate and incite empathy in audience members. Another victim of the Holocaust, Betsie Tenboom, once said, “There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.” Life is, at its core, a horrible dark pit, but God is not content to leave us there. God comes down as the

embodiment of love, the first un-horrible thing to exist, and takes on all of our horror so that we do not have to. As an artist and Christian, I have a responsibility to tell stories that point to the truth of God's condescending love. By taking on this project, we have the opportunity to encourage people to further empathize with the outcast. My personal artist's mission statement is to tell stories through childlike eyes that point to truth. As a 13-year-old girl, Anne embodies a perspective of innocence in a dark world. Rather than glorifying her as a profound mind, we get the chance to honor a true picture of a struggling person in a dark world. Anne said, "In spite of everything, I believe that people are still good at heart." The fact that Anne believed this is beautiful, though (as Zizek and the Bible affirm) incorrect. This dichotomy will create an interesting tension for the audience to wrestle with and interpret. I pray that in experiencing this show, audiences will be blessed by the understanding that we are indeed horrible, yet in the depth of our sin, God purchased grace and mercy for us.

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