

# Art Versus Artist: What's a Poor Reader to Do?

by [Stephanie Huang](#)

As the summer of 2020 slowly ticked by, buckling under the weight of a global pandemic and a long overdue racial reckoning, it turned out that there was room for more public outrage. On June 6, 2020, *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling retweeted an article titled “Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate.” Mocking the inclusive phrase “people who menstruate,” she tweeted, “I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?”

Later the same day, she posted a Twitter thread denouncing such language as “erasing of the concept of sex,” arguing that though she is sympathetic to the plight of trans people, she believes “sex is real and has lived consequences,” and women like her who are “vulnerable in the same way as women – ie, to male violence” should be allowed to feel “kinship” (@jk\_rowling). The backlash was immediate. Twitter users criticized her tone-deaf statements and pointed out that trans people were disproportionately likely to be victims of violence, and former cast members of the *Harry Potter* films publicly voiced their disagreement. As if she had not said enough, Rowling then took to her website to publish the nearly 4000-word essay, “J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues.”

In her essay, Rowling reveals her personal history with domestic abuse, to which she attributes her concern regarding the rise of trans activism and how it infringes on “single-sex spaces.” She dismisses accusations of her being a TERF (trans-exclusionary

radical feminist), noting that “Ironically, radical feminists aren’t even trans-exclusionary – they include trans men in their feminism, because they were born women.” The greater irony here is that Rowling trips over her glib justification of TERF ideology while attempting to play off her own transphobia. TERFs are so named because they do not consider trans *women* in their feminism, and their deliberate inclusion of trans men serves merely as further evidence of their invalidation of trans identities. Rowling also pulls out the familiar trope of molesters masquerading as trans women in order to infiltrate women’s bathrooms, stating, “I want trans women to be safe. At the same time, I do not want to make natal girls and women less safe.” Rowling sets up these two conditions as being mutually exclusive, implicitly suggesting that the safety of trans women must come at the expense of ‘real’ ones. Near the end of her essay, Rowling attempts to justify her stance by addressing her role as an author: “I have a complex backstory,” she writes, “which shapes my fears, my interests and my opinions. I never forget that inner complexity when I’m creating a fictional character and I certainly never forget it when it comes to trans people.” This last statement serves as a bitter reminder for *Harry Potter* fans, for whom Rowling’s inspiring and incredibly successful *Harry Potter* series created a community like no other.

With *Harry Potter*, Rowling created an intricate wizarding world in which both her characters and her readers grew up. Harry and his friends dealt with poor homework grades and unyielding professors against the backdrop of a burgeoning war, which serves as an allegory for the rise of Nazism in 1930s Germany. The persecution of Muggles led by Lord Voldemort, a power-hungry wizard obsessed with maintaining a pure wizard race, is inspired by Hitler himself (“New Interview”). Perhaps the startlingly dark content is part of what has made *Harry Potter* such a source of comfort for so many. Aside from the allure of magic and misadventure, readers are drawn to its message emphasizing the power of love. After all, it is his mother’s love that saves Harry from Voldemort’s killing curse.

In one *New York Times* opinion article, author Jackson Bird writes, “Through her books, Ms. Rowling helped teach a generation the power of not just tolerance, but fierce acceptance and unconditional love.” Bird notes that it is these values that made its fans into a “community of loving, passionate people who accepted [him] with open arms when [he] came out as transgender at the age of 25.” But for many fans like Bird, their devotion to a book series that encourages “acceptance and unconditional love” made it all the more heartbreaking when Rowling revealed herself to be blatantly transphobic. As critical consumers, we must then face the question of how to reconcile a valued work, be it for sentimental or literary reasons, with a problematic creator. To what extent can we separate the art from the artist, and does the questionable history of an artist detract from the value of their work?

This is an age-old question in the history of literary criticism. One central text from this rigorous debate is the essay “The Death of the Author” by French theorist Roland Barthes. First published in 1967, “The Death of the Author” is an analysis of the issues of authorial intent and the relationship between authors and their works. It argues for the complete disregard of the author’s intent and biographical context when reading a text. Barthes criticizes the tendency for literary critics to assign “greatest importance to the ‘person’ of the author,” because to “give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (157). It is here that we must unpack Barthes’s use of the term “Author.” If, as Barthes suggests, it is the readers who “give a text an Author,” the position of ‘Author’ cannot simply refer to the writer of that text. Rather, the ‘Author’ is a conceptual thing—a figure through which we view a work. The author writes a text, but they are also 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” (155). Barthes argues that the presence of the Author is therefore a manifestation of the cultural fallacy of conflating the writer, “his person, his life, his tastes, his passions,” with his work (153). In doing so, the work itself becomes an allegory for the author’s own life, thereby containing some ultimate

secret meaning for the reader to find. This limits the reader by reducing the purpose of reading into searching for that given meaning. Barthes encourages his audience to separate the author from their work because “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” (155). Freed from the Author, the language is allowed to speak for itself. The emphasis of literature must then shift to the reader, who is the “destination” of the text. In fact, Barthes argues that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (158). In order for a reader to fully contend with a text, to discover its multitude of meanings, the Author must be killed and buried.

If we are to adopt Barthes’s ideology, then we can completely remove all association between Rowling and her work. A reader of *Harry Potter* may then choose to read the work through whatever lens they see fit. For example, Jackson Bird recalls being a young child and internalizing the characters’ own journeys to self-acceptance as a way to quell his own gender dysphoria. Yet Bird still describes the recent revelation of Rowling’s transphobia as being a “punch in the gut,” now wondering “if [he’ll] be able to separate the author from the text, if and when I decide to read the books again – a decision [he’s] yet to come to a conclusion on.” It’s a stark juxtaposition: a book that was once a source of comfort to Bird is now one that he may decide not to read again. However, there is a counterpoint to consider: why is Rowling’s transphobia even relevant if the *Harry Potter* books have nothing to do with trans issues? After all, a reader unaware of Rowling’s Twitter statements might not pick up on any transphobia within the text itself. This is a familiar conundrum in such controversies. Bird himself repeats the mantra of trying to “separate the author from the text,” but what exactly can we classify as author and text, respectively?

In his article “The Birth of ‘The Death of the Author,’” rhetoric professor John Logie delves into the context surrounding the publication of “The Death of the Author” and Barthes’s own possible intentions. Logie notes that “The Death of the Author” was first

published in issue 5+6 of the multimedia magazine *Aspen: The Magazine in a Box*, which featured various objects including pamphlets, records, and games from artists such as Marcel Duchamp, John Lennon, and Yoko Ono (495). The unacademic “circumstances of its composition” prompt Logie to suggest that “it was never meant to be a traditional literary or scholarly essay” at all (494). In fact, Logie argues that Barthes intended for the essay to be read within the narrow context of the magazine, which was centered around the Minimalist art movement. In that case, “The Death of the Author” can be read as a defense of Minimalism, which art critic Michael Fried had recently argued was too reliant on an audience to give it meaning (502). In “The Death of the Author” itself, Barthes argues against assigning the text some singularly definitive meaning based on historical or biographical context. However, Logie argues that our understanding of Barthes’s essay may shift if we consider that the original context of its publication is much more obscure than its later reprint in his anthology *Image, Music, Text* (494). This suggests some limitations of Barthes’s text that we may address through French philosopher Michel Foucault’s “What Is an Author?”

“What Is an Author?” was originally delivered as a lecture in 1969 and is often regarded as a rebuttal to Barthes’s work, although Foucault never explicitly mentions Barthes (Gallop 3). In it, Foucault attempts to define the term “work.” He argues that even though many critics such as Barthes advocate for disregarding the relationship between author and work in order to analyze the work itself, we cannot designate something as a work without knowing the identity of its creator. After all, if an individual is not an author, then can we deem his writings a “work”? Furthermore, he states, “Even when an individual has been accepted as an author, we must still ask whether everything that he wrote, said, or left behind is part of his work” (207). Published books, such as the *Harry Potter* series, would indeed be considered Rowling’s works. But could her tweets be her works, too? Although posting on Twitter is hardly the same as publishing a book, if we consider the public and unnervingly permanent nature of a tweet, then perhaps we may indeed categorize Rowling’s tweets as her works, just as much as her

books and essays. If we are asked, then, to reconcile *Harry Potter* with Rowling's transphobia by separating her as an artist from her works, is that really possible?

We must also consider the implications of elevating such forms of writing to a 'work' of an author, keeping in mind that Foucault's designation of Author extends beyond simply that of a writer. Foucault argues, "The author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse" such that it "shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes," but "speech that must be received in a certain mode and . . . receive a certain status" (211). In brief, an "author's name" carries weight. A transphobic statement uttered by someone without influence might be considered "ordinary everyday speech," but statements authored by an influential figure such as Rowling are something more. According to Foucault, they must be "received" differently because they have "a certain status."

Of course, Rowling is certainly not the first author to express problematic personal beliefs. One such example that comes to mind is another once-beloved children's author, Roald Dahl, who publicly admitted his antisemitism in an interview just prior to his death (Moscati). Rowling's transphobia is comparable to Dahl's antisemitism. However, we also must acknowledge the fact that Dahl is very much dead while Rowling is alive and, like most people in our time, possesses an active social media account. In fact, the very nature of Twitter, with its retweets and reshares, allows Rowling's statements to reach a wider audience than even Barthes or Foucault might have imagined possible. These types of platforms allow authors much more direct engagement with their audiences, and so we have more material on which to judge their personal beliefs. While a reader may choose to avoid engaging with Rowling's social media, the coverage of her Twitter statements by mainstream media is emblematic of the almost unavoidable relay of information in today's Internet culture. Ignorance (of the author) may be bliss, but maintaining that ignorance has become a more difficult task. When we hold authors accountable for the beliefs they choose to

broadcast, we begin to see that some of our ability to ‘kill’ the Author, as Barthes encourages, may rely upon whether that writer is still alive. After all, the separation between art and its problematic artist becomes more difficult when that author can continue to profit actively from having people buy and read their work. As for myself, I know that I will not be spending any money on Rowling in the future. Perhaps it is naïve, but I hope that at least some form of financial repercussion will force Rowling to hear out the fans who once grew up in the world she created.

Regardless of whether we are dealing with an author from today or a century ago, what we must realize is that they are real individuals with their own histories and beliefs, and idolization is always a fickle thing. As a child, I was obsessed with the books of Enid Blyton, who crafted stories of adventure and wholesome British summers. In a Wikipedia spiral last month, I found out that Blyton’s books are considered “deeply racist” by the writer Jamaica Kincaid and other critics, which extinguished any nostalgia I still held (qtd. in Bouson 207). In fact, I sometimes wonder what Blyton might have thought at the sight of me, a little Asian second grader, tucked in the library alcove during lunch hours, eagerly flipping through one of her *Famous Five* novels and imagining the simple pleasures of sleeping in a field of heather. Now whenever I pick up a new book, I am a little more wary – there is always the inevitable Google search that occurs midway through my reading. Even so, there are times when I let my guard down and imagine, just for a moment, that these words were meant for me.

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– “If sex isn’t real, there’s no same-sex attraction. If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn’t hate to speak the truth.” *Twitter*, 6 June 2020, 6:02PM, [twitter.com/jk\\_rowling/status/1269389298664701952](https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269389298664701952).

– “The idea that women like me, who’ve been empathetic to trans people for decades, feeling kinship because they’re vulnerable in the same way as women – ie, to male violence – ‘hate’ trans people because they think sex is real and has lived consequences – is a nonsense.” *Twitter*, 6 June 2020, 7:09PM, [twitter.com/jk\\_rowling/status/1269406094595588096](https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269406094595588096).

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