



Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal
University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

Literary discourse: do writers put the ‘author’ in authority? Disruption in literature regarding authorship and authority

Author(s): Simi Kaur

Source: Groundings Undergraduate, May 2018, Vol. 11, pp. 36-41

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

Licensing: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The CC BY 4.0 license is a Creative Commons license. This is a non-copyleft free license that is good for art and entertainment works, and educational works. It is compatible with all versions of the GNU GPL; however, like all CC licenses, it should not be used on software. People are free to: Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format; Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. But they must conform to the following terms: Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. No additional restrictions — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

Literary discourse: do writers put the ‘author’ in authority? Disruption in literature regarding authorship and authority

Simi Kaur

The exploration of disruption regarding the authorship and authority relationship—if there is one at all—is a beyond challenging concept; and because of this raises ontological questions. The texts *The Pillowman* and *The Good Soldier* provide an interesting scope for this investigation, as the characters are aware of themselves as authors and of the readers within the narrative. Can we ever separate authorship and authority? I will explore the disturbing effect that authority has on the relationship between text, reader and author. Clearly, the lines are blurred when regarding Cora Kaplan’s statement—“For me the greatest danger when reading a literary text is to assume that authorship and authority mean the same thing.” The factors I will discuss are: subjectivity, power relations, unreliable narration, self-conscious narrative, the meaning of art and egalitarianism and the value of names and texts. These factors appear to blur the lines between authorship and authority. The factors I chose to discuss acquired analysis and further inspection, when looking at the authorship-authority relationship.

For me the greatest danger when reading a literary text is to assume that authorship and authority mean the same thing.

— Cora Kaplan¹

For readers, it is quite dangerous to forget who controls the narrative; it can be disruptive. In reference to both Ford Madox Ford’s novel, *The Good Soldier* and Martin McDonagh’s play, *The Pillowman*, I will discuss “authorship” and “authority” and how this can be dangerous when both can, as Cora Kaplan states, “mean the same thing”.² The word “author” meant “father” in 1300.³ The word draws on the Latin root “auctor” with meanings such as “enlarger, founder, master, and leader”. The word “authority” shares its origins with the Latin root, “auctor”: in its nominative form, the word is “auctoritas,” and has meanings such as “invention, advice, opinion, influence, and command”.⁴ The word “author” therefore connotes paternalistic influence through its etymological connection with “authority”. Thus, there is a danger of mistaking authorship and authority for the same thing. This leads to disruption when it comes to power and ownership of texts.

It is dangerous to mistake authorship for authority when the narrative is subjective when it is not from a third person omniscient perspective, which prevents us from seeing who really holds authority. In relation to author, text and reader, we must look at narrative perspective and what this reveals about authorship. *The Good Soldier* is told from a first-person perspective; the narrator is also involved in the story, and so his narrative is limited. In agreement, as Roland Barthes suggests, it could be “the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us”.⁵ Though, even if they are, we, as readers, could interpret this as both reliable and unreliable, as he could be withholding other parts of

SIMI KAUR is a student at the University of Glasgow studying for a bachelor’s degree in English Literature and hopes to pursue a career in journalism and/or writing.

¹ Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism*, (London: Verso, 1986).

² Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6; Robert Ainsworth, *Ainsworth’s Latin Dictionary* (London: C. and J. Rivington, 1823), 11.

³ Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, 6.

⁴ Ainsworth, *Ainsworth’s Latin Dictionary*, 11.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Image-music-text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Palabra: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 145.

the story and/or telling the truth. As readers, we can never know. John Dowell is dishonest, naïve and fickle. This is obvious from his opinionated description of characters in the novel that he is involved with. Dowell believed Edward to be a “good soldier”, which is ironic, as we know he is not, yet Dowell describes him a “normal man”.⁶ Later, Dowell calls him “wicked and mean”; this flighty character construction Ford produces reflects the tone of the novel and its subjectivity.⁷ To understand Booth’s explanation of the concept of the unreliable narrator it is important to understand the term “implied author”.⁸ Booth coined the term “implied author” to exemplify the distance between the real author and his or her work, and thus avoids the problems that can arise with an autobiographical reading of a novel.⁹ The personality of an implied author can be a complete opposite of that of the real author. The implied author is a disguise that the real author uses to tell the story with a certain effect; is the author therefore projecting himself onto the text? A reader will react differently to different types of implied authors and this reaction helps to determine the reader’s response to the work. The writer can alter the guise of the implied author to suit the effect he or she wants. The author, here, is in a significant position of power; the very reason that authorship and authority are mistaken for the same thing.

Despite differences in form, *The Pillowman* also displays issues regarding the authorship-authority relationship, but in a contrasting manner. The play’s form exposes less subjectivity due to its third-person perspective. Though, the author’s moral of the play is subjective as it is moulded into a contextual play about power relations. Power-relations are important to inspect when focusing on authoritarianism. Katurian’s stories inspired Michal to reenact what Katurian “wrote and read out” to him.¹⁰ This is what the authorship-authority relationship embodies when authorship can have such a deep impact on its readers, it leads to action. Katurian cannot stop Michal from acting out his stories and harming the children he sought after. This is the main dilemma in *The Pillowman*; particularly as it is set in a totalitarian state. This dictatorship means there are no limits to authority in the state. In the play, the detectives are able to uncover most of Katurian’s life through his stories. If we zoom in on the story of “The Writer and The Writer’s Brother”, it is uncovered that the story is partially autobiographical for the relationship between Katurian and Michal.¹¹ As the play goes on, the detectives further their hierarchy over the author (Katurian) and the author’s companion (Michal). Ultimately, Tupolski ends up with the power to decide if Katurian’s stories go down as his legacy, as it is Tupolski’s decision whether to “burn all his stories”; here the power roles are subverted. The author no longer has control over his own stories. The authority that the state holds is shown here; the roles are subverted. The paradox concocted here is the very reason why the dangerous authorship-authority relationship acquires significant danger ethically and philosophically. The choice of what is told or not told is vital; an omniscient narrator therefore holds a lot of power. Many critics, including Culler, uphold the belief that “the narrator’s audience is often called the narratee.”¹² This implies that the audience is a possession of the narrator, as the name suggests. This is supported by Culler’s opinion that “narrators are sometimes termed unreliable,” especially when they provide us with information that is subjective, according to their own bias, which inevitably makes us doubt their interpretations of events.¹³ This implies that the narrator speaks with authority as he dominates the narrative. This is how the author controls our viewpoint of how things are perceived by readers, through the nar-

⁶ Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier* (London: Oxford Publications, 2012), 141.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸ Greta Olson, “Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators,” *Narrative* 11, no. 1 (January 2003): 93–110.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2003), 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹² Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 82.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83

ator, particularly in the texts mentioned; exemplified in *The Pillowman* through Katurian's own description of his life—"that's my life. I stay in and I write stories".¹⁴ The author suggests our society is damaged because of the world's view of text as a commodity. The power relations constructed in the narrative affect the reader's perception, and in doing so the author exhibits authority.

Authors clearly hold authority due to the unreliability of the narrative and the narrator. This is explicit through Dowell's narration being shaped in a psychological order, as opposed to a chronological order; this is something the author chooses to do as they hold authority over the narrative. Looking further into this, Dowell's narration relies on the principle of "progression d'effet" and is presented as free direct thought, occasionally alternated with direct speech where Dowell quotes the other characters in the story.¹⁵ Despite his eloquence, Dowell's free direct thought allows for an impressionist narration in which Dowell is able to tell "the story as it comes" and to digress, emphasise, understate and abbreviate.¹⁶ It also allows him to tell the story in a psychological rather than chronological order. Dowell's narration of his participation in the story forces the reader to question his knowledge: is it possible that he knew about the affair of his wife and Edward Ashburnham? How could he not have known about the affair? What are his true feelings about the other characters in the novel? How does he truly feel about himself? Is it possible that he is continually lying? When, if at all, is Dowell telling the truth? Hampson and Saunders have reiterated that "he who narrates the story lies even if he swears he is telling the truth".¹⁷ The narrator's opinionated view can sometimes sidetrack us from what we believe to be the truth; disrupting our view. This heightens the author's relationship with authority.

Self-conscious narrative intensifies the danger of authorship and authority meaning the same thing; it furthers the disruption of authority, as the readers are controlled to an extent. We tend to fall into the trap of believing the narrator or author on the grounds that "the reader takes the world described in the text as reality," which is what Stephen Bonnycastle reinforces here. The narrator is constantly aware of their authority.¹⁸ They may also be hiding information from us, as well as telling us that they determine the fate of the story or the telling of the story. The blurring between reality and fiction that Bonnycastle demonstrates is displayed in *The Pillowman* when Katurian's stories become reality: they enter the "real world".¹⁹ This emphasises the epistemological uncertainty of ourselves as readers and contemporary society, as this brings about ontological questions of reality and fiction. It can therefore be interpreted as a self-conscious play, through which it becomes a commentary on a metaplay, which is the author's intent. This is another point which elicits subjectivity and leaves the author in control of influence. As readers, we are limited to knowledge imparted by the narrator due to our limited perspective, when "recounting actions without giving us access to characters' thoughts".²⁰ This highlights the issue that the narrator holds information from the readers. Self-conscious narrative affects how dangerous it can be to assume authorship and authority mean the same thing, as the power authors hold could be inferred as authoritative. This power dynamic is disruptive for readers as we can never know everything we need or want to know.

At times, the reader may be seen as a creator due to the reversal of power, which subverts authority previously held by the author. Another way of looking at authorship would be to explore an-

¹⁴ McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 12.

¹⁵ Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 13.

¹⁶ Ford, *The Good Soldier*, 108.

¹⁷ Robert Hampson and Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity* (New York: Rodopi B.V., 2003), 274.

¹⁸ Stephen Bonnycastle, *In Search of Authority* (United Kingdom: NBN International, 1998), 183.

¹⁹ McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 20.

²⁰ Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, 89.

other possible definition; “a creator of a work of art”.²¹ Therefore, we are the creators of the art through our interpretation and imagination; our exegesis differs from reader to reader. In this sense, it is appropriate to ask ourselves where we draw the line at artistry and how this affects who or what authorship is. It is not always the case that the author is authoritative; they are only in control to a certain extent. This illustrates that the text is personal to readers—no one owns anything—however, we can all remain within our own mindsets. The direct address that Dowell possesses as a narrator to his readers highlights the problem of authority, when mentioning “you see; in those days I was interested in people with ‘hearts’”.²² The reader may interpret this as a bias; as a character trait; as a theme; as an act of foreshadowing. Readers’ identities and beliefs alter how they interpret language. Considerably, on this note, it is possible to separate the authorship and authority. When Dowell states “You, the listener, sit opposite me. But you are so silent. You don’t tell me anything,” he addresses the reader as someone he knows, and in doing so, creates an egalitarian atmosphere, whereby authority is exhibited less.²³ This is not explored in *The Pillowman*, due to its totalitarian atmosphere. Dowell as a narrator constructs his narrative for the purpose of someone he knows to read it; egalitarianism is introduced. McDonagh’s conception in *The Pillowman* is to establish that egalitarianism is lacking in progress. Depending on how we view the authorship-authority relationship, there is a possibility that the author does not express as much authority as they want to.

Texts, and the paratext, enable us to see authorship and authority as a dichotomy that work for socio-political reasons. Texts, particularly novels, are valuable to an author and were seen as a commodity in the pre-twenty-first century; due to early capitalism and industrialism which gave the author power.²⁴ This is still a recurring issue in our present day, to an extent that texts can control an author’s life. We only question this recently in literature due to its prominence in texts. This is evident in the play *The Pillowman*; Tupolski wants Katurian to admit that his stories “are better than all of your stories”.²⁵ Names and texts are considered analogous; equivalent in value. Identity is an essential part of the authorship-authority relationship. Before copyright laws, texts were “valorised without any questions about the identity of their author”.²⁶ For example, if we think about the Bible, many stories are written by unknown authors. Identity affects our perception of a text; “‘Literary’ discourse was acceptable only if it carried an author’s name”.²⁷ This is evident when Ariel talks about his legacy as a police officer; “they’re gonna know my name”.²⁸ Authorship is therefore contingent on their intent, as well as the reader’s response and action. In Katurian’s last moments all he can think about are his texts, “Right at this moment I don’t care if they kill me. I don’t care. But they’re not going to kill my stories. They’re not going to kill my stories. They’re all I’ve got”.²⁹ He is consumed by the texts, which is an ironic theme in the play that the author uses to display the power of possessions and consumerist products. A writer is considered more established if they copyright their own product, and in doing so they enter the world of consumerism. In this way, the authority that the author (in this instance, Katurian) holds it lost once he succumbs to Copyright and state laws; the epitome of capitalism. Now we can see authorship as inferior to authority, as the authorities control the author; reflect-

²¹ “Authorship”, Cambridge Dictionary. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/authorship>. [accessed 14 February 2018].

²² Ford, *The Good Soldier*, 27.

²³ Ibid, 7.

²⁴ Mary Louise Roberts, “Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture,” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (June 1998): 817–844.

²⁵ McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 61.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 125.

²⁷ Ibid, 132.

²⁸ McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 53.

²⁹ Ibid, 42.

ing on society's problems. This is also evident in Katurian's stories about "child-killings" that become reality in *The Pillowman*, for which he is falsely imprisoned for. As soon as he tries to escape the tie to the authorities, he becomes trapped. An author is unable to express themselves anymore without constrictions. We cannot escape the ties that come with authority, and neither can the author.

The socio-political and contextual issues encompassing the texts that I have brought up are all aspects of the disruption that arises when looking at the authorship and authority relationship. It can be difficult to see who holds authority when reading texts, which enables us to question our morals and ethics. There are many aspects surrounding the text, author and reader that affect this relationship. Within these components we can see that they build up certain tensions and uncertainties in terms of questioning authorship and authority. After inspecting the key elements, it is fair to say that one can interpret authorship and authority in many ways, and so I put forward the statement that it is dangerous, as it can often be mistaken for authorship. Nevertheless, both terms clearly do not necessarily mean the same thing. This is entirely contingent on how one personally views each term. We may never be able to see ourselves as just readers anymore, as we are limited to knowledge that is perhaps withheld. This disrupts readers from seeing the text as more than it appears to represent. ■

References

- "Authorship." *Cambridge Dictionary*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/authorship> [accessed 14 February 2018].
- "Authorship." *Oxford Dictionary*. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/authorship> [accessed 14 February 2018].
- Ainsworth, Robert and Thomas Morell. *Ainsworth's Latin Dictionary*. London: C. and J. Rivington, 1823.
- Armstrong, Tim. *Modernism: A Cultural History*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.
- Ascoli, Albert Russell. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *Image-music-text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. Palabra: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.
- Belsey, Catherine. "Writing About Desire." *The Glasgow Review*, 1993–1996. <https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/aboutus/resources/stella/projects/glasgowreview/iss ue2-belsey/>.
- Bennett, Andrew and Nicholas Royle. "The Author." In *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, edited by Bennett and Royle, 18–27. United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited, 1995.
- Bonnycastle, Stephen. *In Search of Authority*. United Kingdom: NBN International, 1998.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Ford, Ford Madox. *The Good Soldier*. London: Oxford Publications, 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. 1997. "What is an Author?" In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, 124–127. New York: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Hampson, Roberts and Max Saunders. *Ford Madox Ford's Modernity*. New York: Rodopi B.V., 2003.
- McDonagh, Martin. *The Pillowman*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2003.
- Olson, Greta. "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators." *Narrative* 11, no. 1 (January 2003): 93–110.
- Roberts, Mary Louise "Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture." *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 3 (June 1998): 817–844.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. "The Linguistic Sign." In *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, edited by Carol Sanders, 59–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Waugh, Patricia. *Modern Literary Theory: A reader*. London: Edward Arnold, 1992.

Wilde, Oscar. "The Decay of Lying: An Observation". In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc, 2010.