

Poetics of an abstract author in Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee*

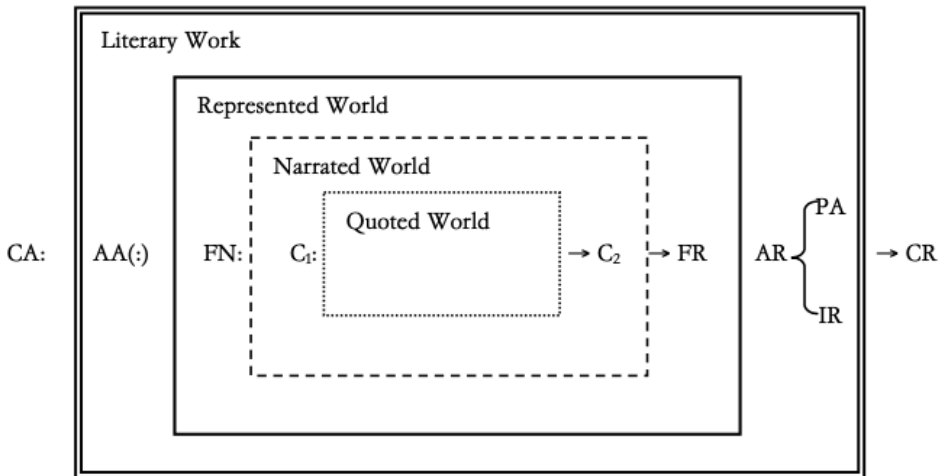
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Abstract. This paper constitutes a part of one of the subchapters of my doctoral thesis the aim of which is to examine the different attitudes to esotericism in Dan Brown's and Peter Ackroyd's selected six novels. The general chapter under which this subsection falls is an attempt to frame Peter Ackroyd's and Dan Brown's esoteric narratives. Having introduced the authors' literary activities at this point, it investigates the narratological differences between them. Nevertheless, this paper exclusively focuses on one of such differences, namely, the presence of the abstract author in Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Doctor Dee* (1994). Here, using the theory of Wolf Schmid, it argues that Peter Ackroyd's text deviates from Barthes' concept of "the death of the author" and conveys the presence of the real author stylistically along with several semantic-linguistic techniques by locating Ackroyd himself within the text as an abstract author.

Keywords: abstract author, mythical self, implied author, second self, Peter Ackroyd

In "The Death of the Author," Barthes describes writing as a space "where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (1977). With the start of the writing process, the author evaporates among the lines and loses control over the meaning production process of the text written by him. His discourse becomes detached. However, this very case is complicated with Peter Ackroyd since he is "blurring... the relation between the writer and his character" (Barthes 1977) and the reader. The connection is hard to detect, yet the author's presence in the novels is traceable not just because of the semiotic acts through the linguistic expressions within the narration. As a concrete living being along with other characters in the narrative work, Ackroyd's presence is not visible, nevertheless detectable. This paper argues that Ackroyd's such camouflaged presence is intentionally being carried with the help of the concept of "abstract author" (Schmid 36). It is an implicit but "a specific role-playing form of the author" (Vinogradov 203) on his behalf. Ackroyd is not a direct subject or the semantic centre of the discourse, nor a narrator of the acts; he is not even a named body. His abstractness comes into light out of a sudden at the end of his novels. Ackroyd engages with the characters in a way that transcends the corporeal understandings of the characters as he unites with them as a whole and leaves the reader in the ambiguity of the comprehension.

In general, to map the location of the real and abstract author in the communication levels of a narrative work, I refer to Wolf Schmid's model sketched as below (Schmidt 35), since – according to my knowledge - it is the most detailed one clearly pointing out each entity of the communication system of a literary work:



Explanation

CA = concrete author
 AA(:) = abstract author
 FN = fictive narrator
 : = produces
 C₁, C₂ = characters
 → = addressed to

FR = fictive reader (narrataire)
 AR = abstract reader
 PA = presumed addressee
 IR = ideal recipient
 CR = concrete reader

The earlier communicative models of the literary works have mainly focused on the interrelation among the author, text, and the reader (Okopień-Sławińska 1971, Bartoszyński 1971, Janik 1973, all in Schmid 2010) and put accent on one of them. From this standpoint, Schmid’s model is multi-layered since it subsumes the transmission of a narrative work through all possible instances not limited to the author and the reader only. For this reason, the illustrated image overtly manifests that the abstract author is totally distinct from the concrete or real author and falls into the realms of the literary work. Furthermore, the abstract author is the creator of the represented world and fictive narrator with the help of which the narrated world is actualized in the text. Based on these insights, Ackroyd’s novel *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993) is one of the transparent examples to track the trace of the presence of Ackroyd’s abstract author. The novel deals with two alternating narratives featuring two characters – Matthew Palmer from the twentieth century and Doctor John Dee from the sixteenth century. Matthew inherits a house from his father in Clerkenwell, where John Dee lived four centuries ago. Matthew is a researcher and investigates theatrical companies of the sixteenth century. Unaware of the prior resident of the house, Matthew starts to explore the surroundings of the house since the location is new to him. Only after his only friend Daniel Moore’s visit, they pay attention to the age of the house and to the fact that it might be older than they assume. He visits the National Archive Centre and searches the years between 1560 and 1570. As the result of this search, he is being told by the archivist that his house was previously owned by John Dee - “a black magician” (93). Thus, he sets out to collect information about Doctor Dee, his father’s relation to Dr Dee and how his father

has acquired the house. It is noteworthy that *The House of Doctor Dee* is a visionary historiographical metafiction and accordingly, historical facts are distorted, e.g., historically John Dee never lived in Clerkenwell as the novel claims.

In contrast to Matthew Palmer's life story, Doctor Dee's chapters tell the story of his activities – getting gold from other metals and creating homunculus – against the background of his life in Renaissance England. John Dee lives with his wife and, after a while, accepts Edward Kelley's assistance to help him in scrying – talking to spirits or angels to reveal the secrets of the philosopher's stone.

It should be mentioned that John Dee and Matthew have a lot in common. They are both isolated, and none of them can build good relations with their fathers at first. Both have a woman figure in their lives that they start to love towards the end of the novel. They are also in search of an unknown and undergo a transformation from darkness to light throughout the book. The novel ends in the dialogue where “Matthew's present self, the texts of the others, i.e., the author's self and the texts of the past, i.e., John Dee's self, blend together within a mystical self” (Garayeva 2021) or in an abstract author:

It's like this house. Nothing ever seems to stay in the same place. And do you know what? This may have been the actual room where Doctor Dee saw his visions. What did I call it just now?"

'The scrying room. Or the chamber of presence. What is the matter, Matthew?'

'Did you hear something then?'

'No.'

'I thought I heard a voice.'

'You'll be seeing him next, glimmering in the corner.'

'Well, I do see him. Look here.'

John Dee heard all these things, and rejoiced. And, yes, I see him now. I put out my arms in welcome, and he sings softly to me... (277)

This dialogue is carried out by Matthew Palmer and his interlocutor, who is not Doctor Dee or any other character featured in the text. The figure taking an active part in the communication between Palmer and Dee is also not a personified or neutral narrator since the narrative work lacks any such symptoms. This is a standpoint that resonates with Boris Korman's "consciousness of the work" (1977), Jan Mukařovský's "abstract subject" (1937), Wayne C. Booth's "implied author" (1983), Janusz Sławiński's "subject of the creative acts" (1966), Miroslav Červenka's "unit in *absentia*" (original italics, 1969), Umberto Eco's "model author" (1979), Antony Easthope's "subject of enunciation" (1983), Gérard Genette's "auteur induit" (1988) or Seymour Chatman's "inferred author" (1990). This kind of author is the merit of the consciousness that the concrete, real author produces through the experiences of the abstract author. Author as a subject of consciousness, "the expression of which the entire work is... is, in principle, the same as the correlation of life experiences and artwork in general: guided by a certain perception of reality and based on certain normative and cognitive opinions, the real, biographical author (the writer) produces, with the help of imagination, selection and the processing of life experiences, the artistic (conceived) author" (Korman 126, 174). The detail making Ackroyd's "abstract author" different from the above-listed concepts is that it does not have an audible

voice and only appears as a part of the narrative in the last page of the book. It is neither an “agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it” nor “the locus of the work’s intent” (original italics, Chatman 74). However, the remaining variations are “responsible for the world-view emanating from a narrative” (Herman and Vervaeck 16).

The positioning of such a technique at the end of the narrative work is of great importance. This final chapter of the book titled “The Vision” is an all-inclusive chapter where all historical periods, plot lines and narrative voices are blended in unison with Peter Ackroyd’s or his abstract self’s voice. The infusion of Ackroyd’s voice into this combination changes the comprehension of the essence of the abstract author, sheds a different light to the total understanding of the narrated work, results in different reading and converts it into a post-cognitive (Martínez 1999) construction. It displays one more time that Ackroyd’s literary text is not independent of him as a real author. However, it does not affect or question the fictive status of the text. The real author’s abstract self is in a fictional world with fictional characters.

In another instance, Ackroyd’s abstract author addresses the reader directly:

Oh you, who tried to find the light within all things, help me to create another bridge across two shores. And so join with me, in celebration. Come closer, come towards me so that we may become one. Then will London be redeemed, now and for ever, and all those with whom we dwell - living or dead - will become the mystical city universal. (277)

The impersonal narrator of the text has transformed into the author’s “second self” (Dowden qtd. in Tillotson 15). This second self or abstract author who has been abstract till the last page is not a mere “semantic dimension of the text” (Nünning qtd in Schmid 42) nor “the norms or value system of a specific work as reconstructed by the reader from that work” (Diengott 1993), rather a (meta)physical participant in communication who has acquired an “authorial intention” (Porter 78) and calls the reader for the action of unifying. In case of the intentional reading of the text, based on the prior knowledge about the concrete author, it can be argued that this authorial intention has emerged from the real author’s – Ackroyd’s position in life. The mystical value attached to London is a traditional device that Ackroyd implements in the most of his London novels.

The above-mentioned case is supported by the path of conventionalism, the followers of which try explicating the implied author “as long as the appropriate information is available” (Kindt and Müller 165; Harker 1988). The information determining the essence of the abstract author is constituted by the dialogue and addressing stated above. Consequently, it also contradicts the Dutch narratologist Mieke Bal’s opposing view as she approaches the concept of the abstract author as not being able to deliver the ideology of the text (Bal 1981). However, it is not the abstract author who is the “source for the aggregate of norms and opinions that makes up the ideology of the text” (Herman and Vervaeck 16) but the narrator or the fictional author. In *The House of Doctor Dee*, not only the ideology of the text is in fusion with that of the characters and abstract subject, but with its real author as well.

In conclusion, coming back to Barthes, his idea that assigning an author to a text is imposing a frame onto that text contradicts Peter Ackroyd’s conventions

since aligning him to a text as an additional abstract author broadens the dimensions of *The House of Doctor Dee*. His metaphysical appearance at the end of the book implicitly signs his omnipresent existence throughout the whole text, which in its turn allows the text to be multi-layered and transcendental at the same time. The abstract author mirroring his image unifies the differing ethea of the main two characters living four centuries apart as well as the reader engaging with the narrated work in the process of reading. Due to the presence of Ackroyd's abstract author, the reader is no longer an external entity outside the literary work but a real and active correspondent penetrating the realms of the represented world within the communicative framework of the narrated work.

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