

LITERARY THEORY IN RELATION TO THE **CANCEL CULTURE PHENOMENON**

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This paper seeks to analyze the relationship between cancel culture and the literary concept of authorial intent. In recent years, questions regarding “cancel culture’s” effects on the public’s ability to enjoy a “problematic” author’s work have been discussed. By analyzing two different literary theories, ‘art for art’s sake’ and New Criticism, which both relate to literature’s autonomy and connection to an author, readers are better able to understand the distinction between removing an author from the public’s favor and completely canceling their oeuvre.

Introduction

WITH the explosion of the reach and power of the Internet over the past few years, “cancel culture” has become a hot topic across various fields. “Canceling” refers to the act of publicly withdrawing one’s support for an artist, creator, celebrity, or other notable people. Canceling has become a mainstay in large pockets of internet websites and is slowly leaking into other realms as well. In 2021, Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, in a bid to keep the public updated on this phenomenon, included an article on this term that defined it as the following: “Cancel is getting a new use. Canceling

and cancel culture have to do with the removing of support for public figures in response to their objectionable behavior or opinions. This can include boycotts or refusal to promote their work” (“What it Means to Get ‘Canceled,’” 2021).

The act of canceling can largely be seen through different mediums wherein the “canceling” is being done towards someone with influence through their public persona. This phenomenon has been known to occur with celebrities, authors, and a myriad of other professions. A few prominent examples of how cancel culture can affect an artist’s or entertainer’s past and future works in-

clude the publicized allegations and outrage against actor Bill Cosby, singer and songwriter R. Kelly, and beauty-guru and entertainer Jeffree Star. Within all of these cases, a clear withdrawal of support occurred within the celebrities' personal and professional lives.

Examples of Cancel Culture: Jeffree Star

Star's Origins

When looking at a titan of business like Jeffree Star, who created Jeffree Star Cosmetics in 2014, the power of cancel culture is evident. During the height of his popularity, Jeffree Star was receiving millions of views on the video-sharing website YouTube, where he published makeup-tutorials and reviews. In addition to reviewing other companies' products, Star released his own product lines, including eyeshadow palettes, setting powders, concealers, and lipsticks. One of his most popular products, his "Blood Sugar" eyeshadow palette, was revealed to have made Star more than \$20 million. Reporter Lindsay Dodgson from news publication Insider told readers:

In the second episode, "The Secrets of the Beauty World," which was released last Friday, Dawson asked Star how much he made from his most popular palette. Star totaled up the numbers for his famous Blood Sugar palette on his iPhone calculator and showed Dawson the number. Clearly in shock, Dawson looked at the camera and asked cameraman Andrew Siwicki whether he was filming the screen that read "20,800,000." (Dodgson, 2019)

This staggering amount truly reveals the popularity of Star within the industry before his fall from grace.

Star's Controversies

Due to Star's long history on the Inter-

net, a trail of controversial and divisive artifacts from his past was discovered. Reporting on this situation, *Centennial Beauty*, a news publication that largely focuses on beauty and Internet culture, explained:

Amongst many accusations against the beauty mogul, some have been calling for his 'cancelation' after old photos resurfaced of Jeffree causing self-harm (which he posted himself) and posing with a confederate flag. There is also a screenshot circulating from a social media profile page of Jeffree's called Lipstick Nazi—which has led many to believe he had a beauty brand prior to Jeffree Star Cosmetics with this name. (Centennial Beauty, 2020)

Results of Star's Public Cancellation

Eventually, Jeffree Star's beauty products were removed from stores and promotions due to outcries centered around Star's controversial past. Cosmetics brand Morphe, one of Star's most long-standing professional relationships, severed their relationship once multiple allegations of racism began surfacing. The brand tweeted the following:

Today we've made the decision to cease all commercial activity related to Jeffree Star and affiliated products. We expect this to conclude within the coming weeks. As we look to the future, we will continue to share updates on what lies ahead for the Morphe brand. (@Morphe, 2020)

This announcement truly helps showcase the power of cancel culture and how public outcry could change even the most well-established relationships and opinions of supporters.

Authors and Cancel Culture

The sheer power of cancel culture's effects on the business and reputation of

a celebrity, entrepreneur, or artist cannot be understated. With the prominence of celebrities and other high-profile personalities losing their influence and the respect of the public, thus resulting in the loss of professional and business gains, questions have been raised regarding how this applies to authors, who have also started to face criticisms for their personal lives and controversies. What happens when a poet or author is removed from the public's favor, and what does that mean for their works, more specifically? If the public cancels an author, do they also have to cancel the author's work? If an author has been canceled, does this mean their works are tainted, losing their enjoyability for the reader? The question arises regarding whether or not an author's work is innately tied to their own persona and what it means to separate one from the other.

Sylvia Plath and Cancel Culture

This question has largely been prevalent with authors who are world-renowned and have contributed much to their respective genres, such as Sylvia Plath, H.P. Lovecraft, and J.K. Rowling. Each of these authors has crafted works, such as *The Collected Poems*, "The Call of Cthulhu," and the *Harry Potter* series, respectively. These works have consistently been highly regarded, with each work arguably offering significant influence on their genres. But, when considering the reception of each author's works after controversies due to their personal lives and beliefs, the public opinions are conflicting. For instance, *The Collected Poems*, despite its public success and reception of the first posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1982, has garnered negative attention due to Plath's personal beliefs and

controversies surrounding accusations of racism and antisemitism. Many readers have taken issue with her use of the Holocaust as a metaphor for her poor relationships and mental health issues in her poem "Daddy." Throughout this poem, an extended metaphor is utilized in order to draw a comparison between the pain felt by those affected by the Holocaust and her struggles with mental health. Parts of Plath's poem read:

Although critics have often attempted to view these poems through various literary lenses in order to defend Plath's artistic use of such a controversial topic, many readers have called for her removal from the public's favor.

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew. (Plath, 2018, pp. 35-39)

This poem has often been cited as the reason why Sylvia Plath's works must be canceled. Literary critics, though, have argued for years that this poem does not represent her antisemitism, but instead utilizes the Holocaust in an attempt to show her damaged state of mind when writing this confessional poetry. Al Strangeways (1996) discusses this point further:

The problem of Plath's utilization of the Holocaust can be broadly divided into two parts: the motives behind her use of such material, and the actual appearance of it in her poetry...her motives were responsible, and the often unsettling appearance of the Holocaust in her later poems stems from a complex of reasons concerning her divided view about the uses of poetry and the related

conflict she explores between history and myth... (p. 371)

This defense relies on the idea that Plath herself is not racist or antisemitic; rather, she is utilizing these comparisons in her art in order to highlight the immense pain and suffering the speaker is facing.

Social Media Criticisms and Calls for Cancellation of Plath

Although critics have often attempted to view these poems through various literary lenses in order to defend Plath's artistic use of such a controversial topic, many readers have called for her removal from the public's favor. An example of the personal disappointment readers felt for these allegations is shown through the Tweet, "never mind, sylvia plath is no longer a favorite. she was a racist antisemite [sic]" (@mattsnatcios, 2020). Other readers called for the public to cut their support for the author entirely: "Wasn't Sylvia Plath a major racist and antisemite? Maybe go read something else?" (@StephenWhoreking, 2019). These two reactions from both the literary community and the general public represent two ends of the spectrum of ideas regarding canceling authors and their works.

Schools of Literature

After looking at authors who have recently fallen out of favor with the public, it is necessary to research the background behind differing schools of literary criticism and interpretations of the relationship between a work's identity in relation to its author. In order to accurately explore the possible answers to these questions, an in-depth dive into the world of literary criticism is required. While the study of literary criticism is complex, with many different ties and subtleties within each school or theory, there are a few major lenses that focus primarily on the author's relationship (or

lack thereof) with their text. Firstly, one of the major philosophical theories which can help answer these questions is the idea of "art for art's sake," which discusses the separation of art, such as literature, from what someone might conceive as its purpose. The two major theories which offer distinct, clear views of ideas of authorial intent are New Criticism and psychoanalytic criticism, with the former being significantly more respected within the literary criticism community. Both "art for art's sake" and New Criticism help support literature's freedom from being held to moral criticisms against their authors, thus resulting in being canceled and removed from the public's favor.

Art for Art's Sake

The first theory which provides literature with protection from being removed from the public's favor due to their questionable authors is the theory of 'art for art's sake.' This slogan, translated from "*l'art pour l'art*," was originally conceived by French philosopher Victor Cousin during the 19th century. This slogan has evolved to represent the idea that art exists merely to exist, without any specific need to justify its existence. The Britannica Encyclopedia explains, "The phrase expresses the belief held by many writers and artists, especially those associated with Aestheticism, that art needs no justification, that it need serve no political, didactic, or other end" ("Art for Art's Sake," 2015). The idea of 'art for art's sake' was popularized in response to the ever-growing sentiment from Marxists during the 19th century that it was necessary for art to have a purpose. This notion was often paired with the literary theory of Aestheticism, in which art, including literature, only needed to exist, providing its own beauty and use for those who sought it. These ideas, like so many theories within the community surrounding literary criticism, drew admi-

ration and ire from various places. Gene Bell-Villada (1986), in an article discussing these ideas, dismissed the practicality of ‘art for art’s sake’: “The noble ideal of Art for Art’s Sake became the consolation prize for those poets who were dissatisfied with prose but couldn’t write verse for money. Few were in a position to think otherwise” (p. 439). Even though some critics sought to dismiss this theory, other proponents of its use regularly employed it to analyze works by philosophers and authors. With this theory, artists and authors have been able to find their footing by creating works that are arguably masterpieces, although they do not have a set justification or purpose for their existence.

New Criticism

The next most useful school in determining authorial intent is the school of New Criticism. New Criticism is defined as the “... school of Anglo-American literary critical theory that insisted on the intrinsic value of a work of art and focused attention on the individual work alone as an independent unit of meaning” (“New Criticism,” 2018). This school was arguably the first to truly separate an author’s work from any historical and biographical information that may influence the reader’s mindset. This movement was a proponent of closed-readings, which emphasized that all of the knowledge necessary to understand the work came from within the text itself. W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, two major New Critics, proposed several different ideas within this school, such as the “intentional fallacy”, “affective fallacy”, and “ambiguity” through their analyses of literary criticism (“Intentional Fallacy,” 2016). Their

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widely discussed essay, “The Intentional Fallacy,” published in 1946, discussed the common idea that an author’s word should be taken as the basis for how to view the ideas presented in a text and subsequently critiqued this phenomenon:

Our view is yet different. The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge. What is said about the poem is subject to the same scrutiny as any statement

in linguistics or in the general science of psychology. (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946, p. 470)

Wimsatt and Beardsley’s essay was quickly criticized, dissected, and elaborated on by other major voices within the literary community. While some were unconvinced that a work could gain complete autonomy from the historical and biographical factors, others readily accepted the notion

that a text could be its own entity, thus unable to be criticized by anything unrelated to the text presented.

Psychoanalytic Theory

Contrarily, the psychoanalytic theory attempts to form a connection between an author’s thoughts and their work, cementing them as interlaced. This theory seems to present itself to the antithesis as what New Criticism presented in terms of the significance of an author to their work. Psychoanalytic theories delve into the monumental explorations established by Sigmund Freud. In 1908,

Freud published a short essay titled “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming.” This essay established a framework for what would become the modern theory of psychoanalysis. Freud muses throughout this essay about how an author’s childhood development and psyche can go on to contribute to their writing. Freud utilizes an extended metaphor in order to compare a creative writer with one who daydreams about their own life, way of thinking, and fantasies. Authors, according to Freud, self-identify with the protagonists of their own stories, weaving themselves into the narrative:

We will keep to the latter kind, and, for the purpose so for comparison, we will choose not the writers most highly esteemed by the critics, but the less pretentious authors of novels, romances and short stories, who nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes. One feature above all cannot fail to strike us about the creations of these story-writers: each of them has a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means and whom he seems to place under the protection of a special Providence. (Freud, 1908, p. 425)

Criticisms of Psychoanalytic Theory

With this, it is presumed that through the lens of psychoanalysis, an author would be unable to be removed from his or her novels, as they are an extension of his or her psyche. Others within the literary criticism community largely dismissed Freud’s ideas concerning the ties between an author’s internal thoughts and their writings, including Peter Brooks (1987) in a journal article titled “The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism”:

Psychoanalytic literary criticism has always been something of an em-

barrassment. One resists labeling as a ‘psychoanalytic critic’ because the kind of criticism evoked by the term mostly deserves the bad name it largely has made for itself... And in general, I think we need to worry about the legitimacy and force that psychoanalysis may claim when imported into the study of literary texts. (Brooks, 1987, p. 334)

Critics have largely supported opinions such as Brook’s, criticizing the lack of pure, scientific data to help Freud’s seemingly unfounded claims: “Freud is a live issue for the cultural and literary commentators, and they – we – are bitterly divided. Some – including some distinguished ex-Freudian critics – now agree with the scientists that Freud was wrong, and add that Freud was not merely wrong, but wicked” (Jackson, 2014, pp. 1–3). This sentiment was backed throughout both the scientific and literary communities as each field began to dismiss the ideas that Freud laid out.

Applications of Literary Theories and Cancel Culture


So, it goes to follow if one believes in the ‘art for art’s sake’ theory and New Critic’s assertions regarding the autonomy of art and literature from the author, there would seem to be no reason to completely “cancel” a work of literature due to the author falling out of favor with the public. On the other hand, if one were to believe the weak, often-dismissed psychoanalytic viewpoint regarding literature and the author’s relationship, an author’s views cannot be separated from their works. Psychoanalytic theories, which convey the idea that a book is directly impacted by the author’s dreams, background, biases, etc. are the often-cited reasoning for why a controversial author’s works must be cancelled. This ties directly into why cancel culture would affect an author’s published works. If an

author is accused of being racist or sexist, for example, one following the aforementioned lines of logic could assume that there would be related, controversial undertones within the text. Looking at Plath's problematic writing calls into question whether her works were written with overt or subtle antisemitic messages, creating an ethical dilemma for readers. Detangling these unpalatable views from an otherwise well-written novel could pose as an issue, thus requiring the entire oeuvre to be removed from the public's viewing. But, by using solid foundations of literary theory through the philosophy of 'art for art's sake' and New Criticism, there is a clear argument against retroactively canceling or disregarding a novel due to its author's personal history. A strong case can be made against canceling a novel due to their author's controversies due to the postulations that works are capable of having an autonomous existence with no real purpose aside from what the consumer of these arts assigns to them, combined with the idea that literature is completely autonomous from the author's background and biographical data.

Conclusion

Ultimately, cancel culture is a major, widespread cultural phenomenon that has only grown with the ever-increasing reliance on the Internet. As consumers and onlookers begin to take a thorough look at the personal lives and mindsets of entertainers, creators, and writers, the distinction can be made between these criticisms and the works of the person who is in the limelight. But, when considering artwork such as literature, there are prevalent theories that can help support the argument against canceling the literary works of a "problematic" author. The philosophies behind the theories of 'art for art's sake' and New Criticism vehemently oppose condemning novels due to external factors such as the author's

background, the supposed "purpose" of a novel, and views that are dependent on the individual reader's thoughts and opinions. As the number of past and present authors and artists facing personal controversies grows, it is important for readers and consumers of the arts to retain knowledge on how literary and philosophical theories can help protect works from the controversies of its creator.



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