Why should we bother to learn about critical theories?In fact, "the death of the author" is a simple concept, but unless someone explains it to you the phrase makes little sense. In the early decades of the twentieth century, students of literature were taught that the author was our primary concern in reading a literary work: our task was to examine the author's life in order to discover what the author meant to communicate--his or her message, theme, or moral--which is called authorial intention. Our focus has changed over the years to the point that, now, among many contemporary critical theorists at least, the author is no longer considered a meaningful object of analysis. We focus, instead, on the reader; on the ideological, rhetorical, or aesthetic structure of the text; or on the culture in which the text was produced, usually without reference to the author. So, for all intents and purposes, the author is "dead."In other words, becauseknowledge of critical theory has become, over the last decade or so, a mark of status, an educational "property" for which students and professors compete, it has also become a costly commodity that is difficult to acquire and to maintain at the state of the art. Indeed, I think the anxiety that most of us bring to our study of critical theory is due largely to our initial encounters with theoretical jargon or, more accurately, with people who use theoretical jargon to inflate their own status. To cite just one example, a student recently asked me what "the death of the author" means.And because such writing doesn't seem to connect with our love of literature, let alone with the everyday world we live in, it seems that theory's purpose must be to take us into some abstract, intellectual realm in which we try to impress one another by using the latest theoretical jargon (which we hope our peers haven't heard yet) and dropping the names of obscure theorists (whom we hope our peers haven't read yet).With notable exceptions, most theoretical writing--by the big names in the field and by those who attempt to explain their ideas to novices--is filled with technical terms and theoretical concepts that assume a level of familiarity newcomers simply don't have.These questions, or ones like them, are probably the questions most frequently asked by new students of critical theory, regardless of their age or educational status, and such questions reveal the two-fold nature of our reluctance to study theory: (1) fear of failure and (2) fear of losing the intimate, exciting, magical connection with literature that is our reason for reading it in the first place.Is it really worth the trouble?Won't all those abstract concepts (if I can even understand any of them) interfere with my natural, personal interpretations of literature?Because the meaning of the phrase wasn't evident in the context in which he'd heard it used, the student felt that it must be a complex concept.Because those who used the phrase acted as though they belonged to an elite club, at the same time as they pretended that everyone knewwhat it meant, he felt stupid for not knowing the term and, therefore, afraid to ask about it, afraid to reveal his stupidity."The death of the author" merely refers to the change in attitude toward the role of the author in our interpretation of literary works.It's a simple idea, really, yet, like many ideas that belong to a particular academic discipline, it can be used to exclude people rather than to communicate with them.Everything you wanted to know about critical theory but were afraid to ask He'd heard the phrase bandied about, but no one explained it to him, so he felt excluded from the conversation.I think both these fears are well founded.

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