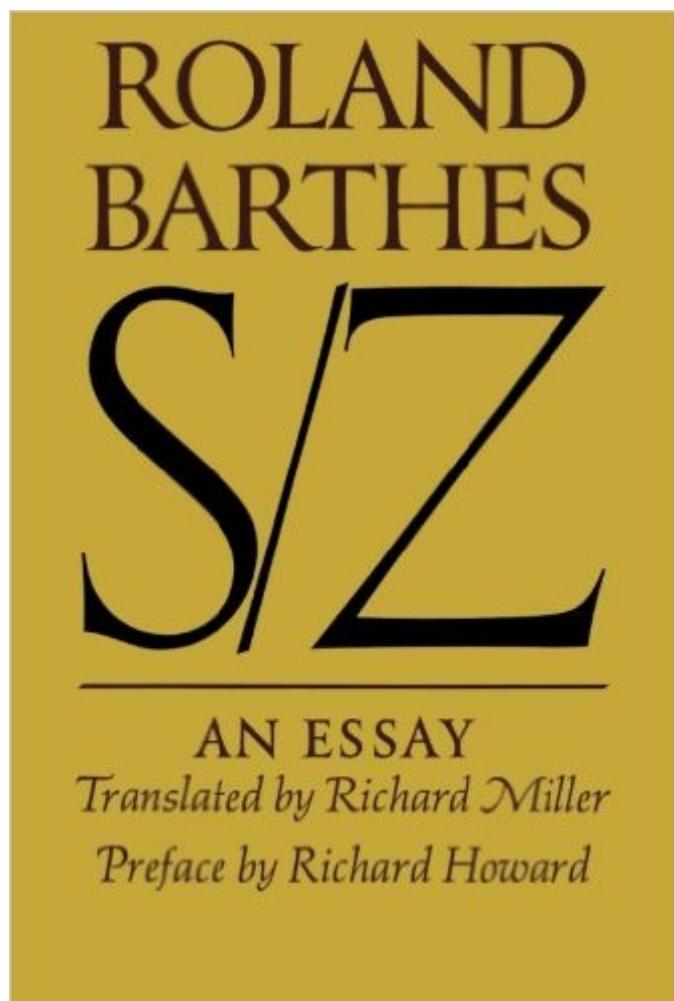


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S/Z: An Essay



Synopsis

Preface by Richard Howard. Translated by Richard Miller. This is Barthes's scrupulous literary analysis of Balzac's short story "Sarrasine."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Roland Barthes began as a structuralist and in *S/Z*, he began to branch off into post-structuralism. *S/Z* is a three hundred page dissection of a short story by Balzac called *Sarrasine*. The plot of *Sarrasine* is relatively uncomplicated. A sculptor falls in love with a woman who is actually a castrato, a man who has had his penis surgically removed. In an earlier published article, "The Death of the Author," Barthes uses *Sarrasine* as a starting point that leads toward involving the reader in a multi-faceted exploration of the story's plurality of voices even as he diminishes the role of the writer. Barthes greatly expanded this premise into a full-length book, *S/Z*. Critics have often wondered how to perceive it. Most agree that Barthes takes the basic concepts of structuralism and expands them so hugely that the result is less a scholarly treatise on structuralism than some weirdly lumped parody of it. Whatever traditional elements of structuralism are examined, by the time that Barthes finishes, structuralism as a working and generally accepted theory of literary criticism has been so thoroughly sliced and diced that its remaining strands seem wispy, fragmented, and totally unable to account for the plurality of discourses that Barthes insists are right there to be discerned. Reading *S/Z* requires one to reach a mindset that judges it as either an exhilarating voyage that embraces a new way to read established texts or as an upsetting

deconstructing of long held assumptions that used to divide the universe into emotionally satisfying and complete entities. Prior to the publication on *S/Z*, most critics tended to view literature as exemplifying the belief in the Universality of Man--that man had a basic and eternal soul that represented a series of fixed and basically wholesome attributes. The literature that man wrote subordinated a myriad of free-floating pluralities of thought to inhere within a centered core of meaning. The result was that both reader and writer assumed that man and his universe could harmonize in a mutually receptive collaboration that seemed to be as "natural" as it was eternal. This tendency for the reader to accept passively the author's explicit and implicit set of themes and assumptions in a conventional and predictable manner Barthes called "readerly." Barthes then threw an intellectual fragmentation grenade into the collective and overly composed psyches of readers whom Barthes saw as needing a weaning from their smug complacency. In this new paradigm of reader involvement, Barthes urges his readers to recognize that whatever the nature of the text that they are reading, that text is not composed of "new" elements. In fact, all texts are merely recombinants of previous texts, and these texts are similarly composed of other and earlier recognizable elements. It is the readers' duty to perceive that these texts are codes which operate within an overarching cultural network, leading readers to expand their vision outward as they follow an infinitely expanding set of philosophical and literary threads. To do this well demands that readers work much harder than their readerly peers. These readers must involve themselves more closely in the act of reading. They are far more likely than one who is readerly oriented to reinvest the text with a plurality of previously submerged meanings. In fact, Barthes suggests that when this reinvesting reaches a critical point, a brand-new text emerges, one which is a function of an aggressive reader interacting with a text that is no longer seen as closed or complete. This tendency for the reader to create a "new" text merely by following the recursive and infinite loopings of delineated codes Barthes called "writerly." Barthes writes of authors, mostly of the classical sort, who created novels that focused on not upsetting the literary applecart by avoiding contradiction and welcoming a centering of meaning. These novels had clearly defined hierarchies. These inward-looking novels were of the readerly sort that encouraged readers not to question the Way Things Were. Modern novels, by contrast, demand of the reader not only to question underlying assumptions and ideologies but also of the author to engage the reader to do precisely that. As far as textuality was concerned, readers could decode any text--even otherwise readerly ones--in a writerly way by whisking away the bland illusion of unity and coherence to discern the fragmented unreality that simmered underneath. The "codes" that Barthes uses to configure all texts are the same codes that can be used to give shape and form to virtually all aspects of culture from books, to

art, to television commercials, and even to professional wrestling. Barthes never assumes that any code comes in a pre-packaged ball of reality that is a subset of some ultimate context. Rather, these codes are people dependent, the meanings of which have relevance only to those who are already conversant with them. Since readerly texts, in Barthes' opinion are no more than the enervated relics of discarded ideologies, it is essential that writerly texts step into this literary vacuum as a shield against the predations of a thuggish ruling class that once needed such linguistic chicanery to retain the reins of power. In *S/Z*, Barthes writes of a way of thought that is light years from traditional structuralism and very closely mirrors the soon to be felt impact of the deconstructionists who followed just a few years later.

I decided to write a paper on Barthes' *S/Z* after it was highly recommended to me by my professor of literary criticism. Criticism usually puts me to sleep when I read it, and this professor claimed that *S/Z* kept him up all night, it was so fascinating. This was not the case for my first reading of *S/Z*, but the more I opened the book, the more interesting it became. Barthes' criticism is of the most unusual kind; what he writes about Balzac's *Sarrasine* is "neither wholly image nor analysis" - it is his reading of Balzac's text, a very close and detailed reading. I began to appreciate *S/Z* even more when I began my own project of dissecting a text using Barthes' theories. It was a difficult endeavor, but it helped me to understand what an incredible piece of work *S/Z* is. Barthes uses *Sarrasine* to look at literature - what it is, who reads it, what happens when we read, and to show that reading for the consumption of stories is only to deny ourselves of the real pleasure of the text.

Understand what this little book is and its significance. Barthes begins with a short story by Balzac and then plays with its interpretation. He "rereads" the story using different treatments. His goal: to show that there is no Author who gives an Absolute Meaning to the text -- that it's the reader who provides his/her own meaning to it. The Author is dead, long live the Reader. You may or may not get this concept, but trust me, it's a significant shift in literary theory. I've taken the time to write all this in hopes you don't read it the way I did the first time, wondering "What in heck is this?"

S/Z is a crucial text for anyone interested in the history of literary criticism, as *S/Z* marks a major turning point in the discipline. Prior to *S/Z* the dominant mode of criticism was structuralism, which as its name implies was the study of structures. Analogically basing itself on the success of the study of structures in fields ranging from anatomy to chemistry, social structuralism sought to likewise identify a core structure to a text, in which the 'essence' of the text could be said to lie,

independent of the outward details. However, at its basic level, a text is nothing more than a collection of words; the idea of a structure behind these words can not inhere in the words themselves, and therefore must be a product of the human mind attempting to make of these words. This is the realization that Barthes is more or less forced to reach in this study. *Prima facie*, this work is a work of hyper-structuralism. Barthes undertakes to comprehensively break down the text of 'Sarrasine,' a classic novella written by the early nineteenth-century French writer Honoré de Balzac. Going line by line, sometimes even phrase by phrase, Barthes divides the text up into constituent units, which he then analyzes in closer detail to see the ways in which the meaning of each unit is produced. By analyzing the text at such a close, fundamental level, Barthes ultimately undoes the project of structuralism at the same moment that he realizes the fullness of structuralism's effort. (Insert line about Hegel and how history always 'overcomes itself'). This is because Barthes is forced to realize that structure, at least when applied to texts, is not a given. What appears as structure is in fact the product of the reader's dialogue with the bare text; thus, there exist different structures for different readers, or even different structures for the same reader, if she is sufficiently sophisticated as to hold multiple, competing interpretations in her head at the same time. This of course opened up the door for post-structuralism, and its interest not in the structure of the text *per se*, but instead the ways in which interpretive groups impose structures upon texts. In terms of content, *S/Z* won't likely present you with any new cognitive information that you don't already have, assuming that most people who'd be interested in reading this text in full have already been exposed to the major ideas of literary theory in form or another. However, it's no exaggeration to call this book one of the most formative texts in literary and cultural studies of the later twentieth century; while it's easy to try to simply reduce the text to a cognitive summary, it's still well worth reading as an exercise in rigorous literary criticism, as well as a foundation from which to make historical and ideological sense of more recent movements in the discipline.

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