

Emily Barbosa

Professor Kristof

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### The Connection Between an Immoral Artist and Their Work

At the beginning of last year, I impulsively bought tickets to a Rex Orange County concert from a girl selling extras. At the time, I knew little about the artist and my soon-to-be friend. During the next few months, I grew closer and closer to her, and we developed a strong bond in such little time. I also slowly began to familiarize myself with the artist and his music. Although there were some songs I did not know, his concert was one of the best nights of my life. Months later, I continue to hold that experience close to my heart because of the lasting bonds I made with the artist and my friend. However, in October 2022, it was exposed that Rex was accused of six counts of sexual assault. With very little information on what occurred, I refused to listen to his music after that. I did not want to support someone who does not represent what I believe in, however, my friend and I struggled with how we were going to let him go, and more importantly, his music. To us, his music represents pain, loss, euphoria, and the bond we formed that summer. We were not sure if we were ever going to be able to cut him out of our lives, but we also struggled with the idea that it would be going against our morals. I wanted to continue to listen to his music, but if I did, that would mean I would be supporting him and his actions. From my experience with Rex Orange County, I want to explore the question: is it possible to hold an artist's work as valuable while simultaneously disagreeing with their actions or behavior?

One thought in which someone can separate an artist and their music is through an adaptive literary lens called the Death of the Author. Established by French literary critic Roland Barthes in a 1967 essay titled “The Death of the Author”, Barthes proposes, “this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins” (1). The author has no authority once they start to write, their words no longer belong to them. Keeping the author's death in mind, the writing belongs to anyone who takes possession of it. In the context of an immoral artist's work, the Death of the Author suggests that the artist and their work can be separated, allowing someone to maintain the worth of a piece of work from an unethical artist. This source provides one perspective on how someone can create a separation, by removing the artist from the lyrics, a song can still hold as valuable to that specific person, even if the artist is not seen in the same position.

This idea stems from a twentieth-century theory called the New Criticism which “tended to consider texts as autonomous and closed”, and deems the author's background as irrelevant to the text's meaning (“New Criticism”). Similar to Barthes's Death of the Author, New Criticism removes any authority from the author and gives it to the reader. This goes hand in hand when put into a lyrical sense. For example, the artist is also considered irrelevant and their music can be removed from their possession and put into the listeners. In the situation mentioned earlier, according to New Criticism, one should be able to ignore Rex and his controversies and can continue to listen to his music without considering it as supporting him. In an article called “Good Art, Terrible People: Is It Immoral to Enjoy the Work of Immoral Artists?”, author Andy Lamey agreeingly states, “formalists considered it a vulgar mistake to devote attention to anything other than an artwork's formal features”. It would be lacking the sophistication to incorporate an author's biography when appreciating a piece of art.

Finally, the Aesthetic Response is another lens that is thought to be responsible for the separation of an immoral artist and their art, which allows for their work to be held with value. In an article titled “Conflicted Art: How to Approach Works by Morally Bad Artists”, Daisy Dixon explains a philosophy where “ethical criteria should not be brought to bear on the aesthetic realm, for subsuming art under ethical issues is to ignore the true essence of art, which is simply the affording of an intense aesthetic experience”. There is no need for context behind a piece of art to enjoy it or to consider the fact that an unethical person created it. In fact, to acquire and debate such information could be to go against the purpose of art. While someone's morals do reflect the person they are and the decisions they make, they may have the ability to create beautiful things that others enjoy, cherish, or even relate to. To be unethical and create deserving art are two non-mutually exclusive events according to the Death of the Author, New Criticism, and the Aesthetic Response.

Other opinions suggest the author's background and context help shape the meaning behind the writing. Although New Criticism mainly focuses on the separation of artist and art, the contemporary culture of New Criticism states that the author holds power. It is thought to be “centered on his person, his history, his tastes, his passions”, where the reader takes account of their life and how it is deeply rooted in their product (Barthes 1). All aspects of the author contribute to the significance of their work. Without recognizing the above-mentioned, the piece of art may be lacking. The author's background can also influence the way someone interprets the artwork. Author Erich Matthes believes, “It doesn't need to be the only lens through which we view the painting ... but it's certainly *a* lens we can use, and knowing these facts can add depth to our appreciation of the art” (qtd. in Lamey, “Good Art”). The author's background does not have to be the final say when interpreting artwork, however, Matthes argues that it is crucial

to have some sort of acknowledgment for a better understanding. Furthermore, one way someone creates a strong connection to an artist is if the words they say reflect that person's feelings. It especially deepens a connection when it is revealed that the artist, who is otherwise seen as invincible, has personally dealt with some of the same issues the listener may be experiencing. My first time listening to Mac Miller's "Poppy" was a few months after my grandma passed away. Before discovering that song, I had always associated Mac Miller with a lively pop genre, however, "Poppy" was the opposite of that. It was the first song of his I heard that deals with sad emotions, where he reflects on his grandfather passing away and coping with his loss. Although I already formed an immediate connection because I was going through the same thing, I wanted to explore the song even more. By doing so, I was able to understand Mac and the song to a whole other level, one that would not be possible if I did not learn about the song in addition to the artist and his connection to it.

A person's morals and limits can be another factor in the decision on what to do with artists who do not reflect one's values. An article written by Eden Mor titled "Can We Separate the Art From the Artist?" argues that a person must make their decision on their own and it is "unfair to force these expectations upon everyone else". Everyone, at any time, is responsible for making decisions that impact others around them. However, deciding who to support or who not to support should not affect anyone other than oneself. Mor makes it a point to share how they have specific boundaries on who they will not listen to and how this is reflective of individual morality. There are some cases where, although one may not agree with an artist's choices, one can create that separation and be able to enjoy their music without feeling remorse. One must be able to recognize their boundaries and draw the line when appropriate, however, the line does not

need to be the same for each person. The quantitative aspect of supporting an artist comes into question as well.

When weighing options on what outlook to have on an immoral artist, an individual must consider a financial aspect in addition to one's ethics. In "Complicity and Solidarity: Is It Wrong to Enjoy the Work of Immoral Artists?", Erich Matthes uses Chick-fil-a as an example, a company with a questionable past "for its charitable donations and CEO Dan Cathy's public comments opposing gay marriage". As reported by Amelia Lucas in a *CNBC* article titled "Chick-fil-A No Longer Donates to Controversial Christian Charities After LGBTQ Protests", activists pressured Chick-fil-a to cut ties with such organizations in response to the new findings about the company's harmful donations. Matthes states, "your individual decisions to forgo fried chicken sandwiches makes no difference (you're not going to hurt their bottom line on your own), but your solidarity with the cause has moral significance" (52). While a specific company or person may have achieved overall success with their business, many may worry about financially supporting indecent corporations. In reality, one person's contribution will not make a significant difference in revenue, when it is a large company, such as Chick-fil-a, in comparison to a small locally owned business that has unethical business practices. Some may choose to boycott and protest against Chick-fil-a, however, others can make the argument that their contribution to the company makes no impact, it simply depends on a person's morals. Therefore, Matthes argues that although it will not make a difference to the recipient, it does to the consumer and their morals, especially since they possess consumer buying power, the ability on who or what to spend money on. If an artist's actions have crossed an individual's line, their solidarity in boycotting that artist stands with those who the artist may have negatively affected.

After researching the many techniques and ideologies of how critics evaluate this type of question, it seems as though there is no concrete answer. Whether or not it is possible to hold an artist's work as valuable while simultaneously disagreeing with their actions or behavior can only be answered by an individual. However, it is not black and white. Even with all the resources I found during my research, I struggled with associating with a specific way to support Rex Orange County without feeling guilty. No amount of literary or philosophical theories could justify the ethics behind my choices. I was increasingly conflicted when a few months after the accusations were released, Rex publicized that he was cleared of any wrongdoing due to lack of evidence. In an article written by Larisha Paul titled "Rex Orange County: Sexual Assault Charges Dismissed Following Investigation", Rex stated:

I was wrongly accused of touching someone one evening on their leg, neck, back, and bottom. That led to 6 charges of sexual assault. The only evidence against me was the individual's account. However, CCTV footage obtained by the police contradicted their version of events. Their partner was also present throughout the evening in question and gave a statement to the police which did not support the allegations against me. (qtd in Rex Orange County, "Rex Orange County").

Ultimately, I was relieved, and I thought I would finally be able to listen to his music again and reclaim the artist I once idolized. My conscience was clear because that meant I did not need to justify how I could support him. However, it is not that simple. Even though he stated that the footage and a reliable witness did not support the victim's claims, no one could ever know what really happened. A large part of my confusion came from my own growth that started in 2020 when I took a self-defense class at my high school. One section was about how to physically defend yourself from an attacker, and the rest of the course included informational content like

rape culture, the dangers of victim blaming, and stories from survivors. I was able to gain a unique experience with self-defense and the widespread violence against women which has helped shaped my morals and make up who I am. I will continue to carry this information with me, especially in this world where violence against women increasingly grows. So while I was filled with relief at the fact that the charges were dropped, my morals tell me that there could be a small chance that they were dropped prematurely and the victim was telling the truth, however, I can never know for sure. Nonetheless, it is important to have the ability to recognize the artist's wrongdoing. To ignore any type of controversy or past actions, such as assault, would be privileged and dangerous to those affected. While I have been able to once again appreciate Rex and his music, these accusations will always stick with him and his fans, which is why I will always question myself and wonder if it is wrong to listen to an artist like Rex Orange County.

Therefore, I feel as though the individual is the only person that can decide whether or not to support an immoral artist and their work. The Death of the Author, New Criticism, and the Aesthetic Response are a few lenses that allow for a separation between the artist and their work. In doing so, an individual is able to appreciate the work by letting it stand on its own, with no influence from the artist's biography or history. This way, someone can take the artist's work and adapt it as their own, to fit whatever experience that person may be going through and ignore the malice of the creator. In contrast, the author's biography can help shape their work and the connection someone forms with it. And since there is no right answer, depending on the threshold, one may still support an unethical artist's work, even if the sentiment comes from the artist's background that is expressed through their artwork. This all derives from the idea of individual morality, where an individual decides for one's self how to live. Choices may range from what they put in their body to living an honest and charitable life. Individual morality

allows for someone to make their own choices, without pressuring anyone else or receiving that pressure from outside sources. One's choices or threshold may differ from someone else, in fact, this should be expected. Everyone has a different, unique perspective on life based on the things they have seen or been through. It is unfair to expect others to fit the same mold, which is why it is up to an individual to decide if they can value a piece of work while simultaneously disagreeing with the artist's actions or behavior.



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