

## Teaching and Learning Guide for: Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning

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### *Author's Introduction*

The relationship of the author's intention to the meaning of a literary work has been a persistently controversial topic in aesthetics. Anti-intentionalists Wimsatt and Beardsley, in the 1946 paper that launched the debate, accused critics who fueled their interpretative activity by poring over the author's private diaries and life story of committing the 'fallacy' of equating the work's meaning, properly determined by context and linguistic convention, with the meaning intended by the author. Hirsch responded that context and convention are not sufficient to determine a unique meaning for a text; to avoid radical ambiguity we must appeal to the author's intention, which actualizes one of the candidate meanings. Subsequent writers have defended refined versions of these views, and a variety of positions on the spectrum between them, in a debate that remains central to philosophical aesthetics.

### *Author Recommends*

1. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468-88.

Locus classicus of the anti-intentionalist position. Wimsatt and Beardsley hold that appeal to the author's intention is always extraneous, since intention cannot override the role of linguistic convention and context in determining meaning. Criticism, they argue, should thus proceed by careful examination of the literary work rather than by sifting through biographical material that might hint at the author's intentions.

2. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1967). The seminal statement of actual intentionalism. Hirsch holds that "meaning is an affair of consciousness and not of physical signs or things" (p. 23), though he allows that linguistic convention constrains the meanings the author can intend for a particular utterance. He argues that the author's intention is necessary to fix meaning, since the application of conventions alone would typically leave a text wildly indeterminate.

3. Alexander Nehamas, 'The Postulated Author: Critical Monism as a Regulative Ideal', *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1981): 133-49. Argues for a version of hypothetical intentionalism according to which interpretation is a matter of attributing an intended meaning to a hypothetical author, distinct from the historical writer. This view allows the interpreter to find meaning even in features of the work that may have been mere accidents on the part of the historical writer.

4. Gary Iseminger, ed., *Intention and Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992). An outstanding collection including both classic and new essays representing most of the major viewpoints in the debate.

5. Noël Carroll, 'Art, Intention, and Conversation', *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Iseminger, 97–131.

Defends modest actual intentionalism, according to which the work's meaning is one compatible both with the author's meaning intentions and with the conventionally allowable meanings of the text. Carroll holds that literature is on a continuum with ordinary conversation, to which an intentionalist analysis is apt; for this reason he rejects anti-intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism, which emphasize the purported autonomy of literary works from their authors.

6. Daniel Nathan, 'Irony, Metaphor, and the Problem of Intention', *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Iseminger, 183–202.

Argues that even irony and metaphor, which are often thought to require an analysis in terms of the author's actual intentions, are in fact best understood on an anti-intentionalist approach.

7. Jerrold Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature', *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996), 175–213. Revised version of 'Intention and Interpretation: A Last Look', *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Iseminger, 221–56.

Defends a version of hypothetical intentionalism according to which the meaning of a literary work is the meaning that would be attributed to the actual author by members of the ideal audience. Argues that literary works should be treated differently from everyday utterances, since it is a convention of literature that its works are substantially autonomous from their authors.

8. Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

Examines competing accounts of the nature of intentions as they pertain to a variety of issues in the philosophy of art, including the ontology of art, the nature of authorship, and art interpretation. In chapter 6, argues for partial intentionalism, according to which some, but not all, of a work's meanings are non-redundantly determined by the author's intentions.

9. Stephen Davies, 'Authors' Intentions, Literary Interpretation, and Literary Value', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 46 (2006): 223–247.

Defends the value-maximizing view, according to which, when there is more than one conventional meaning consistent with the work's features, the meaning that should be attributed to the work is the one that makes the work out to be most aesthetically valuable. Allows for the attribution of multiple meanings when more than one candidate (approximately) maximizes the work's value.

### *Online Materials*

[NOTE TO EDITOR: On-line material on this topic is extremely thin, and the items I have identified are of limited relevance (though the Beardsley entry does have a relevant section). This list might be better omitted from the document.]

1. Beardsley's Aesthetics (Michael Wreen)

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beardsley-aesthetics/>

2. Speech Acts (Mitchell Green)

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/speech-acts/>

*Sample Syllabus for a Graduate or Upper-Level Undergraduate Seminar*

**Week 1: Foundations**

1. Wimsatt and Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy'.
2. Livingston, 'What Are Intentions?', *Art and Intention*, 1-30.

**Weeks 2-3: Actual Intentionalism**

1. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, ch. 1-2, 1-67.
2. Gary Iseminger, 'An Intentional Demonstration?', *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Iseminger, 76-96.

Optional reading:

1. Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, 'Against Theory', *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 723-742.
2. Stephen Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, 'Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction', *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1987): 49-58.

**Weeks 4-5: Modest, Moderate and Partial Intentionalism**

1. Carroll, 'Art, Intention, and Conversation'.
2. Robert Stecker, *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), ch. 2, 29-51.
3. Livingston, 'Intention and the Interpretation of Art', *Art and Intention*, 135-74.

Optional reading:

1. Carroll, 'Interpretation and Intention: The Debate between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism', *Metaphilosophy* 31 (2000): 75-95.
2. Stecker, 'Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64 (2006): 429-38.

**Weeks 6-7: Hypothetical Intentionalism**

1. William E. Tolhurst, 'On What a Text Is and How It Means', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 19 (1979): 3-14.
2. Nehamas, 'The Postulated Author'.
3. Levinson, 'Intention and Interpretation in Literature'.

Optional reading:

1. Nehamas, 'What an Author Is', *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986): 685-91.
2. Nehamas, 'Writer, Text, Work, Author', *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. A. J. Cascardi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 265-91.
3. Levinson, 'Hypothetical Intentionalism: Statement, Objections, and Replies', *Is There a Single Right Interpretation?*, ed. M. Krausz (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2002), 309-318.

**Week 8: The Value-Maximizing View**

1. Davies, 'The Aesthetic Relevance of Authors' and Painters' Intentions', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41 (1982): 65-76.
2. Davies, 'Authors' Intentions, Literary Interpretation, and Literary Value'.

**Weeks 9-10: Anti-Intentionalism**

1. Beardsley, 'The Authority of the Text,' *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 16-37.
2. Nathan, 'Irony, Metaphor, and the Problem of Intention'.

3. Nathan, 'Art, Meaning, and Artist's Meaning', *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. M. Kieran (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 282-295.

Optional reading:

1. Beardsley, 'Intentions and Interpretations: A Fallacy Revived', *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. M. J. Wreen and D. M. Callen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1982), 188-207.
2. Nathan, 'Irony and the Author's Intentions', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 22 (1982): 246-56.

### *Focus Questions*

1. Is the difficulty of ascertaining the author's intentions a good reason to reject actual intentionalism?
2. Should literary works be seen as largely autonomous from their authors, even if we think that interpretation of ordinary utterances is properly a matter of ascertaining the speaker's intentions?
3. Are linguistic context and convention sufficient to determine the meaning of a literary work, or is the author's intention required to stave off an unacceptable degree of ambiguity?
4. Should the author's intentions about the genre or category to which the work belongs have a different status than intentions about the work's meaning?
5. Can the author's intentions have a non-redundant role to play in fixing meaning even if we take the role of context and linguistic convention seriously?