

The death of the author term paper example

[Law](#), [Evidence](#)



When reading a text, how important is the actual intent of the author? If a reader gleans a different meaning from a work than the author intended to include, is that viewpoint still valid? According to the Formalist school of literary criticism, the intentions of the author are irrelevant; as long as there is a concrete meaning to be gleaned from some interpretation of the text itself, it is valid. Formalism looks at the structure of a work itself to determine its meaning, regardless of whatever sociopolitical or narrative ends the author originally had in mind. In this light, the text takes precedence over the author, becoming a thing in and of itself instead of simply a product of the author, and therefore a piece of him or her.

The author has a very limited power over his text; as a result, he has a responsibility toward his readers towards giving them a piece that is clear enough in its intention to provide adequate interpretation by the reader. The issue of interpreting works is always a complicated one; in any work, there can be varying interpretations and views of what the author means to say or what can be taken from it. Given the concept of 'death of the author,' the subjective views of the interpreter can often be said to be just as accurate as authorial intent.

Much of the philosophical basis for the school of formalism, and the idea of the 'death of the author', can be found in Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (1954). In it, the idea of literary criticism being informed by the author's intention is deliberately challenged. "The design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (1954). According to their argument, the reader cannot glean solely from the writing itself what the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-death-of-the-author-term-paper-example/>

author intended - since they are only deriving meaning from the text, anything the reader already knows to be fact about the life of the author is tertiary data, irrelevant to the conversation.

Wimsatt and Beardsley state that there are three different categories for evidence that can be taken from a text to form a literary criticism, whether valid or invalid. First, there is internal evidence - these are the things that the work itself provides. Details and information provided by the text within a poem or written work (or any other kind of art) provide objective, unadulterated basis for analysis and interpretation. Specific words used in a work, the structure of it, and the prior knowledge that the reader has of that particular genre can be used without the need for an intentional fallacy, and is perfectly valid for investigation (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954).

Secondly, there is external evidence; this evidence does not concretely present itself in the work. This includes all of the things known about the author, including their political leanings, their background, interviews and statements said by them, etc. These things can be used to form a reasoned opinion on what they might have been trying to say within a work. However, this falls squarely into the territory of intentional fallacy; the author's intention does not matter - one person can glean an entirely valid interpretation of a work that is completely different from another's, including the person who wrote it. The reader does not have to be slave to the author's intention; often, that intent is not apparent within the work, and so it does not have to be forced from the work and into the reader's understanding of it (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954).

Lastly, Wimsatt and Beardsley discuss the idea of contextual evidence. With contextual evidence, a reader looks at the author's other works and places the work in question into a particular type of relationship with that remaining body of work. In this instance, it is possible that authorial works could all inform each other and be interpreted similarly; this particular type of evidence is a little bit shakier in terms of what constitutes an intentional fallacy. For example, a novel by a certain writer can be compared to other novels that writer has written - similar themes can be found in the body of work that are not apparent in individual works. However, this could run the risk of focusing too much on external evidence; when this happens, intentional fallacies occur. Context must be examined and applied carefully to literary criticism to avoid these kinds of mistakes from occurring (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954).

As a result, it can be gleaned, according to Wimsatt and Beardsley, that only internal evidence can strictly lead to a valid literary criticism; anything else "leads away from the poem" and takes away from the reader's ability to glean importance from the work itself; instead, they are attempting to ape what the author meant to say instead of taking something from it themselves (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954). This falls far from the premise that the work no longer belongs to the author; if that is so, their intent or state of mind when writing the poem or text should not matter. When a poem is created, "it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond its power to intend about it or control it. The poem belongs to the public" (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954).

Barthes (1977), in his essay "Death of the Author," claims that that author is a "modern figure, a product of our society it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the 'human person'" (pp. 142-143). To that end, the phenomenon of the importance of authorial intent is often explained; many readers see the need to honor the intention of the individual who wrote it by also understanding and subscribing to their interpretation. To these individuals, works are written with specific agendas or interpretations in mind, and it is a disservice to the author to disregard these interpretations or intentions. From this perspective, external evidence is often the primary determiner for what a work 'means,' as all that matters is what the author says and does, and what he meant when he wrote the work. This is an extremely reductive way of looking at literature and art, as it implies that equally reasoned and valuable interpretation of a work, even when they become personally important to the reader, are rendered less valid because it is not what was 'meant' to be taken from the work by the author. As Barthes says in "Death of an Author," "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text" (p. 147). It is, according to proponents of authorial intent, possible to get a literary interpretation 'wrong,' even though said meaning could work in a vacuum (Barthes, 1977).

Barthes notes that literary criticism is not about deciphering texts, not to try and guess what the author was thinking when they wrote it; instead, the intent of criticism is just to glean whatever can be found from the work, usually based on the reader's own biases, experiences and the like. "To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing" (Barthes, 1977). The author

being factored in to the search for meaning in a work is to impose the author's own opinions on the reader, and to perform "interpretive tyranny" on them. There are many different meanings and layers to be found in a variety of works, and the reader can extrapolate different ideas from the work than were intended from the author. "A text's unity lies not in its origins, but in its destination" - here, Barthes notes that the reader, being the ultimate consumer of the work, has the ultimate purview regarding what the final meaning of the work is for them.

Authors, according to Barthes, are "scriptors" - creators of the work, but not influences upon the work. It is not their job to explain the meaning of the work; the scriptor "is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, [and] is not the subject with the book as predicate" (Barthes, 1977). The reader, therefore, is co-author and co-writer along with the original author - the reader is creating the meaning for themselves, with the help of the raw materials provided by the author. Barthes simply does not believe we can truly ascertain what the author intended when they wrote the work, and we should not need to - there is no one single perspective to ascribe to a single work, just as a single event can be viewed through many different viewpoints.

Of course, there are those who do believe in the importance of the author's intention in a work. Michel Foucault, in his essay "What Is an Author?" (1969), he states that the notion of "author function" allows the author to be a mitigating factor in criticism; regardless of the validity or invalidity of a reader's interpretation of a work, the author's intent is still a valid means of

classifying said work. " The Author is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses the author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning" (Foucault, 1969). Foucault notices a number of trends in modern literary criticism that have " metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing, as something designed to ward off death." As a result, whatever people write, regardless of whether or not it is considered a 'work,' is their work, says Foucault; he cites examples like the Marquis de Sade, whose papers were merely " rolls of paper onto which he ceaselessly uncoiled his fantasies during his imprisonment," but are now considered great works of literature.

Foucault believes that every piece of paper written by an author is just a part of his collected works, which all work together to tell a complete story. To remove the author from the work, then, would be to separate that component of his work from the rest of it and rob it of its collective meaning. Furthermore, it would also diminish the meaning of the author's name, to which Foucault assigns great importance. A name " has other than indicative functions: more than an indication, a gesture, a finger pointed at someone, it is the equivalent of a description" (Foucault, 1969). This removes the identity of the author and takes something away from him when the author is stated to be 'dead.' To that end, creating importance to a work without the author removes it from the context of where it fits in the remaining body of work.

In discussing the 'author function,' Foucault makes a very interesting point in that all works are part of one larger work, creating a discourse that must be

seen all the way in order to understand and interpret; the only thing linking these works prior to analysis is the name of the author. However, to take this perspective is to place fairly impractical constraints that are not even necessarily asked of by the author; in order to give a valid reading of a work, it then becomes necessary to read all of the other works, otherwise whatever reading or discourse is gleaned does not have the proper context. This is simply impractical, and is not asked of by anyone, including author or publisher - otherwise, entire bodies of work would be published as one work.

What's more, Foucault posits that virtually everything an author writes down is a work, regardless of whether or not it is published. To that end, it would be necessary to collect an impossible amount of data, much of which would not even exist anymore in many cases, to create a reading. Given these incredible constraints and high requirements, literary criticism must be limited to the individual works themselves in order for any criticism to remain relevant and workable.

Stanley Fish, in his essay "Interpreting the Variorum," expresses a very clear perspective regarding disparate interpretations of works, as he does with the interpretations of the works of Milton over the years. According to Fish, on the subject of the interpretation of the word 'spare' in the last couplet of one of Milton's poems, "What if for the question 'what does 'spare' mean' we substitute the question 'what does the fact that the meaning of 'spare' has always been an issue mean'?" (Fish, p. 750). Instead of looking at the context of the word in the poem itself, Fish argues that one should discuss the reasoning behind this conflict of context in the first place. Fish asks that, if "

everyone is continually executing interpretive strategies and in that act constituting texts, intentions, speakers and authors, how can any one of us know whether one of us know whether or not he is a member of the same interpretive community?" (Fish, p. 750). With this in mind, the only real interpretive strength comes from the acceptance of that interpretation from someone else who interprets the poem the same way. With this gesture, consensus is reached, and the interpretation is supported. There can be no real evidence to support a claim, as it would also be interpretation itself; therefore the only barometer of accuracy can be from the rest of the interpretive community. In this respect, accuracy is reached through consensus; others have to accept one's theory to lend it credence.

Fish is very concerned with reader-response theory; the audience is truly the focus of a reading instead of the author (or even the text). The primary means of literary criticism falls with the relationship the reader has with the text, bringing their own experiences and biases into the fray. In this respect, criticism falls into communities; those who have experienced and view life a certain way will have similar readings as compared to those who fall into different communities. With this in mind, it can be said that the reader's approach to a work is not inspired by individualism, but rather participation in one of many communities; one gets from a work what the rest of their community would. This does not, however, make that interpretation less valid. (Fish, 1976).

Eliot's essay " Tradition and the Individual Talent" discusses the ways in which tradition is perceived, especially as it pertains to poetry. Eliot believes

that the poem itself should come from a somewhat derivative sense of tradition and knowledge of the literary canon. A poet or artist should not shy away from tradition, as it provides an important framework by which the reader can extrapolate the information needed to interpret the poem themselves. At the same time, the author needs to distance themselves from their own sense of identity or message. With this rejection of individual talent in Eliot's works, one can extrapolate that to his concept of literary interpretation, which would thereby eliminate authorial intent as a marker for what the poem or work means.

Since, in Eliot's eyes, the author is meaningless to the work itself, the author should not be considered when interpreting it. Instead, the work's relationship to tradition becomes an important set of criteria for interpreting the work - "Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind" (Eliot, p. 951). Eliot's grasp of interpretation includes our compulsion to separate ourselves from the interpretations of others; "We know, or think we know, from the enormous mass of critical writing that has appeared in the French language the critical method of habit of the French; we only conclude that the French are "more critical" than we, and sometimes even plume ourselves a little with the fact, as if the French were the less spontaneous" (Eliot, p. 951). However, the only criteria that can be used for literary interpretation should be one's own, instead of using the lens of another.

In poetry, according to Eliot, the best works will not advocate the personal feelings of the poet themselves. Instead, the great poet must draw from

regular emotions, universal truths and his own linguistic intensity to channel emotional responses through the reader. Eliot describes poetry as "escape from emotion"; this is true in that the feelings a good poem provides should surpass emotion that is experienced by the reader. The impersonal nature of successful poetry allows it to become independent of the poet, living without him and long past his own beliefs. With this in mind, it can be said that authorial intent is irrelevant, as the work belongs to the public and not the author.

Literary criticism that abandons the intent of the author in their appraisal of a work strives to become an "ontological critic" (Ransom, p. 279). This type of criticism is one of the most fundamental and essential methods of New Criticism and formalism; the structure of poetry and literature is analyzed in order to find meaning. Ransom differed from Eliot in his appraisal of what constituted successful poetry; while Eliot thought literary criteria was insufficient to determine whether a poem was successful, Ransom focused on the relationship between structure and texture of a work to determine whether or not a work was actually a poem. Philosophy was a huge component of Ransom's literary criticism; using abstract thinking and examining the texture of metaphor and language in the works themselves, a poem's real richness could be found. In this way, authorial intent is eschewed in favor of the structure of the work itself (Ransom, pp. 621-622).

In being an ontological critic, the concrete elements of the poem or piece of literature is what is important - instead of ideas, intentions or concepts, specific images and metaphors must be taken at face value and imbued with

one's own idea of what it means. The divide between ideas and facts is not so great when this idea is utilized; analogy is most important to the ontological critic, as that bridges the gap between the physical object that occurs naturally in the literary work and the idea that is, at first, unconnected to it. There is no single, concrete meaning or existence of a singular meaning to a work; "the differentia of poetry as discourse is an ontological one. It treats an order of existence, a grade of objectivity, which cannot be treated in scientific discourse" (Ransom, 1941).

One of the biggest proponents of the intentional fallacy and New Criticism is Cleanth Brooks, whose book *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* helped to establish the rules of close reading poems and other literary works while still discounting the biographical and historical context from which it stems. Due to the constant changes in literary taste, many historicists believe we should attempt to see a poem or literary work in light of that context. However, Brooks altogether rejects that idea: he believes that this perspective involves "giving up our criteria of good and bad," which cancels out "our concept of poetry itself" (Brooks, p. 198). Brooks believes that poems should be given "universal judgments" based on our own estimation of the work itself. A poem should not be held captive by its own historical context, or the original desires of the author, according to Brooks; it is instead a self-contained entity that is only beholden to the reader's interpretation.

Instead of believing that this removes any historical context from the poem itself, Brooks thinks this moves it beyond the historical, and opens the work

up to all manner of contexts. It is entirely possible, in the New Criticism school, for an historical context to affect a reading of the poem. This reading is still entirely valid; it simply is not a requirement of a poem, and interpretations can still be appropriate and meaningful without taking these contexts into consideration. Every study of a poem has value, but it does not necessarily fall into the blanket term of criticism. Brooks believes that historical and biographical literary criticism is a failure, for two reasons: it does not distinguish good literature from bad literature, and it also does not separate literature from other things produced by that culture.

One of the most important aspects of New Criticism espoused by Brooks, which by implication devalues authorial intent, is the notion of the "heresy of paraphrase." According to Brooks, trying to distill the message of a work into paraphrased sentences is absolutely forbidden; this implies that the poem is a message that is to be deciphered, sorting out the flowery language in lieu of making a real analysis. Instead, the crucial part of the work is the form itself, not the content. In a school of literary criticism where the author does not matter, the only way you can get any kind of reading is by looking at the text itself. This is a formalist, structuralist point of view that advocates the meaning of a poem as rooted in the words and how they are used. "The structure of a poem resembles that of a ballet or musical composition most of us are less inclined to force the concept of 'statement' on drama than on a lyric poem" (Brooks, p. 186). Poems are not meant to make statements, even though other types of written works are thought to since they state them more explicitly - drama through action, prose through direct statement. Poetry, on the other hand, is much more couched in form

than many other types of literature, and as such it cannot, and should not, be paraphrased. To do so is to impose a meaning on it for other readers that may or may not be found within the text itself.

Reductivism sits at the heart of a reader's tendency to paraphrase; instead of providing a reader with all possible meanings they could glean from the text, they merely intuit their own meaning and project it onto the poem through paraphrase. Since structure is the single most important aspect of criticism, especially once authorial intent is discounted, it is more crucial than ever to keep the form and structure intact.

There are, of course, those who believe that authorial intent is, indeed, relevant, and whose philosophies directly oppose the school of formalism. Heidegger, for example, places a great amount of importance on poetry as a creator and originator of language. He is also the creator of philosophical hermeneutics, a trend which deemphasizes interpretation itself in favor of a greater understanding of the existential nature of the work. Instead of knowing the world of the poem, Heidegger professed to exist in the world itself. Heidegger saw this as more authentic, as you are experiencing what the characters and the setting are and what they are saying to you instead of reviewing it from a distance. The author's unique circumstances, by which they wrote the book, are revealed through the text, which Heidegger advocates studying through their language (Heidegger, 1971).

Some could argue that the author's intention cannot even be used even when we know from other sources what the intention is. In order to judge a literary work, it must be viewed in a vacuum, as the work itself - the reader

can use their own experiences and judgment to inform their reading of the text, but the work is a public utterance, not a private one, and it does not depend on what the author meant to write about to have a meaning of its own. What's more, it can be nearly impossible to figure out exactly what the writer wanted the work to mean; by extension, it can be difficult to get valid meanings from most literary works. According to Barthes, we cannot learn what a work means unless we hear it straight from the horse's mouth and interview the author. To discredit the reader's own extrapolation of the meaning of a text would be to oppose the true meaning of writing, which is "the destruction of every voice," by telling readers that they cannot possibly know what really mattered in the work (Barthes, p. 143).

With these ideas in mind, what, then, is the author's responsibility toward his audience? Without the author, the work would not be created, and as a result there must be some role fulfilled by them. Should the author then create a work without intention, if that is not the reading that would be necessarily gleaned by the reader? Certainly not; the author's responsibility is still to create a work with intent, as they are still free to express their thoughts and opinions through the thematic or explicit content of a work. What should not be expected, however, is the requirement that a reader should retrieve from that work the exact intent that the author has when the work was created. The author's intention benefits the creation of the work, but not necessarily or strictly the infusion of meaning on the reader. To that end, the author's responsibility could be said to be to have intent in order to provide the actual writing itself with specific meaning and motivation. The

author must be free to accept readers having varying interpretations of their work.

There exist many different theories on how to interpret literary text. Fish thinks that interpretation is evidence-less, and that accuracy can only be found within acceptance by other interpreters within the same community. Text and context are very important ideas to Heidegger, as opposed to Eliot's view that the author should be removed from their intent or viewpoint. Eliot believes that the author is merely the vessel for transmission of the idea. Heidegger thinks the origin of the language used in the poem is the key to figuring out intent or interpretation, though he is more interested in existing within the world of the poem. These conflicting ideas offer equally interesting notions for literary interpretation. When considering the ideas of the death of the author, the ontological critic, and the intentional fallacy, the notion of discrediting readings simply because they may not have been what the author thought about at the time when writing is foolish and reductive. With that in mind, the idea of authorial intent becomes increasingly counterproductive to the notion of literary criticism, and the natural reflex is to turn to a more formalist, post-structuralist and New Criticism perspective on art and literature.

In conclusion, it must be concluded that the author has very little control over the text that he creates. Due to the overwhelming advocacy of the Death of the Author, the intentional fallacy, and other theories that fall into the New Criticism and formalism spectrum, it must be said that the reader's interpretation of a text should not be limited by what the author had in mind

when they wrote that particular piece. Once a literary work is created and published, it becomes the property of the literary community, populated by those who read it. These individuals can use whatever internal evidence they find within the work to create interpretations that are valid to them; often these are shared by interpretational communities whose own experiences are similar enough to find selfsame readings of the work. The author, as a result, has only a responsibility to themselves to convey the meaning they wish to see themselves in the work. The author has no duty to give the meaning to the reader, nor would they be truly able to outside of explicit explanation.

While many believe that the application of ontological criticism and new criticism allows for the author to be invalidated, the opposite creates the unenviable position of invalidating the experience of the reader. Judging a literary work is meant to be a subjective experience, as objective viewpoints on the meaning of a work creates a reductive experience of the literary world that stifles criticism. To that end, authors have very little power over their readers, except to provide the blank canvas by which they can create their own interpretation - their intent cannot and should not be conveyed and adhered to within the work.

Works Cited

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text* pp. 142-148. 1977. Print.
- Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. 1947. Print.

Eliot, T. S. " Tradition and the Individual Talent." 1919. Print.

Fish, Stanley. " Interpreting the Variorum." Critical Inquiry, 1976. Print.

Foucault, Michel. " What Is an Author?" 1969. Print.

Heidegger, Martin. " The Way to Language." 1971. Print.

Ransom, John C. " Wanted: An Ontological Critic." 1941. Print.

Wimsatt Jr., W. K., and Beardsley, Monroe C. " The Intentional Fallacy." from

The Verbal Icon:

Studies in the Meaning of Poetry. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press,
1954. Print.