

Intentional fallacy essay



The text here presented is an essay written by William K. Wimsatt, Jr. which was included within his book named *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* published in 1954. The author introduces to us the concept of “The intentional fallacy” which describes the error of interpreting a work of art by second-guessing the intention of its author in creating it. In reading a poem the reader must lay aside all the possible intentions of the author and concentrate on the poem itself in order to understand the full meaning of it; so his focus has to be on the language used in it.

Wimsatt says “The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth [...]). [...] It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.” The author cannot control the text as soon as he writes it. It becomes public. Just because a poem has a particular author, that does not mean that the recipient should be distracted by the author’s intention. He should examine the public meaning of the poem; which is accessible through the entire structure of the text.

The reader should not interpret the allusion in terms of author’s intention. Wimsatt claims that the author’s intended meaning is irrelevant to the literary critic. The meaning, structure and value of a text are inherent within the work of art itself; because it is an object with certain autonomy. At this point, Wimsatt establishes three types of evidences that can be used in assessing a piece of literature but these ‘evidences’ are not valid nor valuable for literary criticism.

The first one, the ‘ internal evidence’, is that which can be taken from the poem in and of itself without outside assistance. We find it out “...through all that makes a language and culture”. Internal evidence, then, comprises elements of the structure of the text. Examining the internal components of a work is the key to understanding not just by the individual reader but more importantly by the collective public; so we could say that it is also ‘ public evidence’. The critical reader’s analysis of this evidence is open to verification or debate by other readers.

Since in a literary work language, semantics, syntax, grammar and imagery are public knowledge and available to the common reader, this internal evidence is of particular value in discovering the meaning determined by the text. The second type is the ‘ external evidence’ which comes from an external source such as a writer’s journal, an interview with the poet where he answered why he wrote it; a manuscript or reported conversations; but it could also include historical information regarding the context in which the work was produced.

It cannot be a part of the work as a linguistic fact because it comes from a ‘ private’ revelation or an ‘ idiosyncratic’ acquaintance. And the third one, as Wimsatt calls it, is a kind of ‘ intermediate’ evidence derived from the personal experience of the author but he calls it intermediate since it helps to comprehend the linguistic facts in literature. That is to say, it is “ about the character of the author or about private or semi-private meaning attached to words or topics. This kind of evidence is quite similar to the external one as both of them sometimes co-occur. But using such biographical information does not comprise ‘ intentionalism’; instead, it helps

to find unified structures and themes in a piece of literature because knowing the world associated with an author will help the reader to interpret the words written within the text. Wimsatt also states that this kind of evidence distracts the reader from the internal evidence of a text and this is exemplified in a quatrain written by John Donne.

It shows Donne's familiarity with astronomy and that is a reflection of the changing worldwide view of the Renaissance towards science. This could help to interpret the meaning since it is in a sense about Donne's interest but although the poem has a personal theme for its author this fact should not define the public meaning for the reader. Another important thing is that trying to know what a specific image suggests, is an attempt to find out author's intention so we have to avoid responding to allusions, an example where we could find them is in notes.

Notes could function as guides or as indicators of author's character, as they do in *The Waste Land* written by T. S. Eliot. For Wimsatt allusions "ought to be judged like any other parts of the composition" if they are admitted by the reader because from these notes he could firstly interpret that they refer to a particular fact, secondly, they can assume the author's intention in the text and thirdly, and finally, these notes would turn into 'external evidence'.

If the recipient is reading a note and he is not capable of finding and understanding allusions, then the literary work will still have a meaning to the reader, but by recognizing them he would be able to include knowledge over and above what he already knows. All of this shows that from the

internal evidence of the structure of a text a primary feeling of meaning is derived.

So, the “intentional fallacy” comes from a romantic aesthetic ideal that deals with ‘private’ or ‘idiosyncratic’ components of a literary composition, but according to the author, in criticism there is no space for this method. The reader must reveal the reality of literature by observing the ‘internal evidence’ of a literary structure; he must use a formalist outlook to make meaning reachable and this approach should consist in observing a literary work as a self-defining text that has been united by different literary components.