

Boards' outlines in order to find the one which seemed to reflect their own positions most closely, and there is quite a range of interpretation.

Whatever the detail of how and why, it cannot be denied that the ideas stimulated by theory are filtering across to a wider range of courses than ever before. As Patrick Scott suggested, the continuing dominance of one way of interpreting, particularly at secondary level, was damaging to students and to the discipline of English. It eroded for many people all that is stimulating and beneficial about studying literature, leaving English dogmatic, self-contradictory and exclusive. It limited creativity in students and teachers and it disregarded interesting and important ideas about literature, and so about ourselves, others, our lives and our world. It may seem daunting having to 'start again' with new ideas and approaches, but understanding why you need to do so is a very good beginning. As this book develops, I hope that my discussion of key issues in English today will show you how exciting the 'new' English can be, and will encourage you to take this leap.

Summary

- Many people argued that the traditional approach to literature must be the right one, as it seems to be 'natural'. In fact, it is as much a 'learned' technical system of reading as any other literary theory.
- Reading literature in the 'one right way' meant 'theme-hunting', agreeing with what others say rather than arguing about a text, reducing a complex work to one 'right' phrase, seeing subjectivity as a weakness and finding texts hard to read because they had to be read through one particular set of presuppositions.
- One way of resolving this is the introduction of clear Assessment Objectives, as has happened in the UK at AS/A2 level. These set out clearly what students have to do, encourage knowledge of other approaches and stress that you need an awareness of both the historical and the current contexts of a text.
- Learning about these new approaches cannot happen overnight: it is a constantly developing process.
- English is still a very controversial subject. But learning about literary theory can lead to all sorts of exciting new ideas about English, literature and the world.

Critical attitudes

- Where should we start with thinking about how we read?
- What is the intrinsic attitude?
- What is the extrinsic attitude?

English can appear to be quite daunting once you realise that there's an infinite number of ways you can read. If you're told to explore different methods of interpretation, challenge your presuppositions and think about how you read, where are you supposed to start?

In the last chapter, I suggested that learning about different critical approaches or theories is a *process* that you go through. A step in this process is to look for patterns in the way these critical approaches work. To do this is to look for the presuppositions behind them and to think about the contexts in which texts are understood. In this chapter I shall outline one pattern which can be used as a starting point for thinking about a wide variety of critical approaches.

Into the text or out from the text?

If you look at a painting, are you looking through a window to another world or are you simply looking at the composition of colour and shape

on a flat canvas? If you see a painting as a *window*, you might be concerned with what is going on behind the window: who the people are, say, and why they had their picture painted. You might ask about the historical significance of, for example, the skull on the shelf or even why the painter chose that particular subject in the first place. If, however, a picture is only a flat canvas, then you would ask different questions: about how the tones contrast, or how the shapes relate to one another. You might just be struck by the beautiful range of colours.

This same contrast occurs in thinking about literature. When you read a novel, poem or play, how do you approach it? Do you look at it as a beautifully woven fabric of language? Or as an example of writing which tells you about the historical period in which it was written? Is it stimulating because it puts words together in a new way? Or because it pours out on paper the intense experiences and interesting ideas of a particular writer? When we do English, do we study literary works for their pure artistic merit or because they reveal things about the world and their authors? Do you think of yourself as going *into* the text for itself or coming *out from* the text to explore other issues?

One of the longest debates in English has been about whether interpretation should focus on the text as a text itself (a flat canvas) or on the text as evidence for something else, such as its historical period and its attitudes, or an author's life (a window on a world). In an influential book called *Theory of Literature*, published as long ago as 1949, two critics, René Wellek and Austin Warren, called these two contrasting positions the *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* approaches to literature. These two terms are not the names for critical approaches themselves – instead they name contrasting sorts of presuppositions, tendencies or *attitudes* taken by approaches to literary texts. This debate, because it discusses what happens when we interpret in different ways and compares different methods of interpretation, is an example of hermeneutics, the study of interpretation. Certainly the debate has become more complex since 1949, but it is a very good place to start.

Intrinsic attitudes: into the text

The intrinsic attitude is often called 'formalism' because it is concerned, above all else, with the *form* of the text, its structure and language. It assumes that there is something special and uniquely 'literary' in the way literary texts use language. Because of this, the intrinsic attitude concen-

trates on the language of the text as its central object, considering things like the choice of metaphors, the use of symbols, structure, style, contrasts, images, and the development of the plot, to work out what a text means. Although these forms of criticism might sound rather dull and unrewarding, following the intricate paths taken in a text and looking closely at the twists and turns of its language can produce quite remarkable readings and effects. In fact, the very intense scrutiny of the 'words on the page' can result in the most unusual and challenging interpretations of texts, as the multiple and often unclear meanings of each word are weighed up and evaluated. As you concentrate on the words themselves, their meaning becomes not clearer, but more ambiguous (or *indeterminate*). This is most obvious when looking at poetry.

For example, there is a sonnet by the English poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) called 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge', which describes all of London, seen from the bridge at dawn, stretched out and radiant: 'Earth has not anything to show more fair' and the city 'like a garment' wears 'the beauty of the morning'. The poem finishes with these lines:

Dear God! The very houses seem asleep
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

The first meaning of 'lying still' is that the city is spread out, not moving, lying motionless asleep. But the word 'lying' has another meaning, of course: to lie is not to tell the truth. Perhaps the sonnet is implying that the city, *despite* all the beauty of the morning light, is *still* not telling the truth. The sunrise makes London look wonderful but really the city, 'that mighty heart', is still a den of deceit, corruption, falsehood and lies. By concentrating on the language – on the *form* of the text – two separate readings have emerged. On the one hand, London is beautiful, quiet and still in the dawn light. On the other, London *seems* beautiful, but underneath and despite all this beauty it is deceitful and corrupt. These readings are contradictory and mutually exclusive: either London is really deeply beautiful and peaceful or it's actively scheming, lying and dishonest. Which reading you choose depends on the way you interpret 'lying still'.

All ways of reading share this concentration on language to some extent, but, for the critics who tend toward the intrinsic attitude, doing English is principally a matter of looking at the words on the page

with great rigour. This sort of criticism first characterised the subject of English in the 1920s and 1930s. It was first most fully outlined in I. A. Richards' book *Practical Criticism* (1929). Richards gave poems out to his students, without the poets' names, dates, or any other information that might give the students ideas about the texts outside 'the words on the page'. He asked for their responses ('practical criticism') and collected the results. He felt that this was a useful way to study what he considered to be special about literature – its 'literary-ness'. For Richards, and those he inspired, 'literary-ness' is the special sort of manipulation of language that happens, they argue, only in literature, and this is where its value, and possibly its 'moral worth', lies. This idea spread to the USA in the 1930s and 1940s and became a key pre-supposition of the approach to literature known as 'New Criticism'. The methods of interpretation that take this intrinsic approach for granted are often still called 'practical criticism' or 'close reading'.

This sort of intrinsic approach to literature is still very influential and important (in fact, some form of 'close reading' of texts is central to most subjects). When you are asked to do a 'practical criticism', 'write an appreciation' or 'appraisal', 'analyse the main poetic methods', pay 'close attention to meaning, language and structure', investigate the 'style' or 'narrative technique', or even 'comment on the author's skill in suggesting unspoken feelings through incident and description', you are being asked to take an intrinsic approach to literature. Even questions on character or plot, although they seem to have a wider focus, usually lead you to take this approach. Think about how you'd read a text in order to answer the following questions (typical of the 'old' A level):

- How far do you see the relationship between Hamlet and Claudius as the central conflict of the play?
- What is the function of the minor characters in the novel?
- Describe a dramatic scene from the novel and discuss its importance to the novel as a whole.

You wouldn't need any knowledge outside of the play or the novel to be able to answer the questions.

Although it might offer some interesting insights, used alone this intrinsic attitude does have blind spots and rests upon some rather large assumptions, as I outlined in Chapter 2. To recap: some critics claim that

intrinsic types of criticism lead to 'objective' readings, the idea that texts can be independent of their historical, social and personal context, and that 'literary-ness' makes a text a valuable work of art, which is worth studying in its own right. However, even if you claim only to be looking at the text by itself you bring your own ideas, expectations and experiences to it. How can any judgement of worth be objective?

Extrinsic attitudes: out of the text

In contrast, extrinsic methods of interpretation take it for granted that the literary text is part of the world and rooted in its context. An extrinsic critic considers that the job of criticism is to move from the text outwards to some other, not specifically literary, object or idea. Such critics use literary texts to explore other ideas about things in the world, and in turn use other ideas to explain the literary text.

Perhaps the most important and widespread sort of extrinsic criticism is the way of reading that puts texts firmly into their historical context. This is why the extrinsic attitude is often referred to as *historicist*. Historicist criticism, and there are many versions of it, uses literary texts to explore or discuss historical issues, and conversely it uses history and context to explain literary texts. In dealing with Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example, a historicist critic might look through the play to find clues about what was expected of a king at the time Shakespeare was writing, and how the ruler and the nation were thought to be woven together. By the same token, a historicist critic might also use evidence from Shakespeare's time and its historical context to explain the play. But historicist criticism is not limited to works from the past: you could use another form of historical criticism to study a contemporary popular novel – a 'bestseller'. Looking at the way people behave in the novel, even if it might not be considered a great work of art, would reveal all sorts of interesting contemporary social attitudes. If the leading female character, for example, is constantly and obsessively counting the calories she consumes, units of alcohol she drinks and number of cigarettes she smokes, this might indicate, for example, how strongly women in contemporary Western society feel forced to live up to an 'ideal' model of body-shape and behaviour.

Many of the newer ways of reading are based on the extrinsic attitude. Critics who use psychoanalysis as a way of reading might understand a literary text as a product of the author's psychology, or as a way of

understanding parts of the human mind in general. In fact, the work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and other psychoanalysts has been widely used to interpret literary works. Those who explicitly champion political positions use literary texts as evidence for wider historical and political arguments. The many forms of feminist criticism use literary texts to explore the roles of women and men, amongst other things. Other critics start with the text and draw conclusions about, say, nature, humanity or the pitfalls of love. Even approaches that consider the author's intention or her or his life display the extrinsic attitude, since neither the author nor her or his biography are actually *in* the text.

The idea of looking beyond a text to 'the world' is very attractive to those who emphasise the way in which literature is linked to the world. Many new forms of extrinsic criticism have emerged in the last twenty years or so as academics have sought ways of reflecting the changes in contemporary society. The emphasis on new literary theories at university means that you spend a lot of time learning about extrinsic approaches. The new assessment objectives for AS and A2, by mentioning contexts and different readers' interpretations, have also begun to move towards extrinsic approaches. Those who oppose extrinsic critical attitudes point to the fact that in using this approach you start with a literary text, but move away to an object or idea that is *not specifically literary*. They argue that in doing so you do not actually deal with literature itself at all, but rather with politics, the mind, history, gender relations, biography and so on. If you approach a text as if it were a piece of evidence for history, opponents say, then it is no different from a treaty, a will, or any other piece of historical documentation. If you read a novel to learn about the author, the novel itself is no more than a piece of evidence for a biography and no different from a diary entry. What makes the text special as 'literature' is not of interest.

Contrasting these two attitudes

Looking at the key aspects of these attitudes, as shown in Table 4.1, is a useful way to compare and contrast them.

Table 4.1 Intrinsic and extrinsic critical attitudes

Intrinsic attitude	Extrinsic attitude
Into the text	Out from the text to the context
A flat canvas	A window
Literature is worth studying in its own right: it uses language in a unique way	Literature is worth studying for what it tells us about other things
'Great texts' are the focus because they have artistic and possibly moral worth	Any sort of text is worthy of study, as they all reveal 'the world'
'Formalism'	'Historicism'
'Words on the page'	Context
Meanings often indeterminate	Context decides meaning
Practical criticism, 'close reading' and New Criticism	Historicism; psychoanalytical criticism; explicitly political criticism; feminisms; philosophical criticism; biography and other sorts of criticism
Text stands alone	Text only has meaning in context
Knowledge of the text alone	Knowledge of the context (history, author's life and so on)
Style, plot, character	Theme, setting

These oppositions have been the subject of fierce debate and you will come across signs of this at different levels and in different ways right through the discipline of English. Both these general attitudes are valid, as are the critical methods they stimulate. Even if they do have 'blind spots', both have a role to play in English as a whole. Sometimes the most useful works of criticism are produced by a coming-together of these two attitudes in different ways.

Thinking about these general patterns helps to orient you by explaining why approaches to literature have developed in the way they have. This introductory guide to critical attitudes also makes it more straightforward for you to draw parallels between different approaches and to explore the presuppositions and blind spots of any particular approach.

Summary

- One way to think about the presupposition of reading is to divide critical theories into two broad groups or attitudes: intrinsic and extrinsic.
- Intrinsic ways of reading concentrate on *words on the page*. A work is considered separate from the world and the focus is on its internal features. Critics who support the intrinsic attitude rely on language and structure to decide what a text means.
- Extrinsic ways of reading look beyond the text *to the context*. The literary text is seen as part of the world and critics move through the words on the page to broader, non-literary ideas, like history or biography, which are in turn used to explain what a text might mean.
- Both these attitudes have blind spots and gaps. Intrinsic approaches are criticised for assuming that there can be an objective way of reading and for separating literature from 'the real world'. Extrinsic attitudes are criticised for failing to see 'literature' as something special and preferring to discuss non-literary ideas.
- Thinking about these general patterns helps to orient you when you look at different critical approaches, helps you to draw parallels between different approaches and to explore the presuppositions of any particular approach.

WHAT WE READ

The author is dead?

- Who decides what a text means: the author or the reader?
- What is the traditional view of the author, meaning and the text?
- What are the problems with this view?
- How else can we determine the meaning of the text?
- Why has the author always seemed so important?
- What are the consequences of all of this?

Having looked at how we read and what we read, I'm going to move on to other debates in English that centre on questions of literature, meaning and how we see the world. Chapter 7 is about the relationship between texts and meaning, authors and readers.

How important is the author in deciding what a work of literature means?

At first this might look like a silly question: after all, the writer *wrote* the text and must have meant something by it. However, for literary critics this very question has been the focus of one of the most heated debates of the last sixty years. Roughly, the debate has two sides: those who believe that *authorial intention* – or what the author 'meant' – is central to

working out the meaning of a text and those who believe that a text has no fixed meaning and that any understanding depends on the individual reader's interpretation. Perhaps the most influential figure on this second side of the debate was the French writer and critic Roland Barthes (1915–1980), who wrote an article called 'The Death of the Author'. While the whole discussion is more formally known as the debate over the 'intentional fallacy' or over 'authorial intention', it is often referred to as the 'author is dead' debate, in an echo of Barthes's title.

For 'authorial intention': the authority of the author

The Examiners are unanimously of the opinion that the proper interpretation of a first person pronoun in a piece of writing is to take that individual to be the writer unless there is internal evidence to the contrary. This is the only logical course to take. Teachers who urge upon their students the term 'persona' or invite them to use 'safe' phrases such as 'the speaker in the poem' cause their hapless candidates enormous trouble.

(Associated Examining Board Report 1995: 27)

For these examiners, and for many people teaching and studying literature, it is 'common sense' that when a poem is written in the first person, 'I', then that 'I' is the author. They are claiming that any other approach is illogical, and causes confusion. It is even more 'common sense' that what the text means is what its author intended it to mean. However, 'common sense' is often the pretext for taking an idea for granted. If the aim of studying literature is to think about *how* we read, then it is exactly these sort of presuppositions that need to be examined. What, then, are the ideas wrapped up in this 'common sense' attitude?

Those who share this attitude believe that the text means what the author intended it to mean, and nothing else. The text itself, they imply, is like a code, in which the author has encrypted her or his meaning. In reading, the reader decodes the language of the text to find the ideas the writer has hidden within. A diagram to express this might look like Figure 7.1.

This seemingly simple idea – that reading a poem or a novel, seeing a play, is just decoding what the author intended – makes at least four presuppositions that have profound consequences for the study of English.

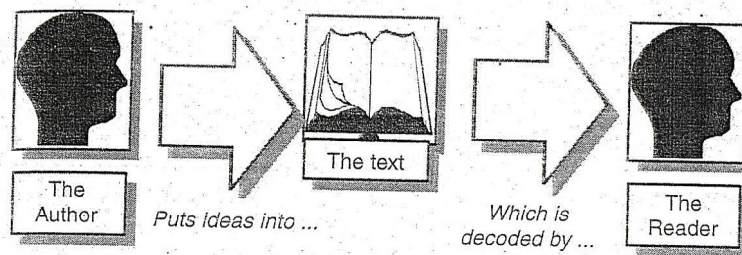


Figure 7.1 The 'traditional' approach

(i) Meaning

If a text is understood as the encoding of the author's intention, it leads to the assumption that the text has one definite meaning, just as a code has a definite meaning. Once the reader has cracked the code, they have explained the text and have solved the riddle: they can give a final and accurate account of meaning and there is nothing more to say. However, works of literature often have ambiguous phrasing and seem to offer two or more meanings. Then people who argue this point of view suggest that the author intended to be ambiguous, and meant both things at once (with the implication that she or he was very clever to be able to do that). In general, this assumption leads to essay and exam questions like: 'How does Shakespeare convey the strengths and weaknesses of Othello's character?' If the reader sees Othello as both strong and weak, it is because Shakespeare intended it to be so. The assumption also leads to some interpretations of texts being described as wrong because they are not considered to be what the author intended.

(ii) Biographical evidence

If you accept that what the author intended is what the text means, it seems possible that you could understand a text without even reading it. Imagine finding some evidence – a letter from the author to a friend, for example – that says, 'I mean my novel to be about the conflict between good and evil.' Then you could say: 'This novel is about good and evil. I know this because the author said so!' It would be like seeing the original message before it was put into code. This sort of interpretation,

autobiographical criticism, uses the writer's life story, through letters, diaries and so on, to explain the text.

(iii) Authorial presence

All these assumptions rely on the idea that the author is, in some strange way, present in the text, actually there. Through reading the text, you are in direct communication with the author. This assumption leads to questions like: 'In *Paradise Lost* Book 1, does Milton convince you that Satan is both attractive and corrupt?' This ghostly presence of the author is the final 'authority' that can decide what the text means.

(iv) Simple evaluation

Once it is known what the author intended and so what the text means, it is possible to judge the text by how well the author achieved what she or he set out to do. This assumes that judging a work of literature is like judging someone in a race. If you know the sprinter intends to run 100 metres in 10 seconds, you can judge whether she or he fails to live up to her or his intention. If you know what an author intended to do, you can ask questions like: 'How successfully does Jane Austen show the growth of her female characters?'

While many forms of interpretation rely upon this idea of authorial intention, and it might appear to be 'common sense', it has been criticised for a range of reasons. These criticisms are outlined below.

Against 'authorial intention': the death of the author

Throughout this book I have argued that texts are always *interpreted* and open to different interpretations, stemming from readers' different world-views. The idea that by uncovering the authorial intention it is possible to find out the 'true meaning' or the 'right answer' runs directly against this and underlies all the major objections to authorial intention.

(i) Meaning: is literature a code?

Is literature simply a code? Certainly, this is the impression given to many students of 'traditional' English courses, such as the 'old' A-level. It is taken for granted that literature is about something – the 'theme' – and

that the job of the student is to discover what this theme might be. So is this really the case?

I would argue absolutely not, for (at least) two reasons. First, the idea is self-contradictory. If literary texts were simply codes, then, paradoxically, literature wouldn't need to exist. Wouldn't it be much simpler to convey a message in a straightforward way, rather than turn it into a work of fiction? Why write a novel to say 'war is evil' when you could just say it, or go on a demonstration, or form a political party, or lobby (or even become) your own representative in government? Of course, there are texts with polemical messages, but when you respond to the message – for example, 'imperialism is wrong' – it's the message or the argument you are responding to, not the work of literature itself.

But there is a more important reason why literature is not simply a code to be worked out. A code works like this: two (or more) people share a cipher where, for example, the letter 'A' is represented by the number '1' and so on. One encodes, using the cipher, and the other decodes, using the same cipher. Thinking back to Figure 2.3 (see p. 24), this cipher represents the 'same way of looking' at a text, so both parties are agreed that 7, 5, 18, 1, 12, 4, 9, 14, 5 is a name in code and not just collections of numbers. But, as I have argued, part of the point of literature is that it encourages different ways of looking at texts, creating different results. So, in fact, reading cannot mean *decoding* the secret message, because there is no shared cipher, no one set of presuppositions we all share. Could you really see a text in the same way as a nineteenth-century author? Or even how your classmates view it? In having 'many ways of looking' we have many different ciphers which lead to many different 'meanings'.

(ii) Biographical evidence

This is also very much open to question. First, reading a letter or diary is not the same thing as interpreting a poem or novel. It would be interesting to find out what a text meant to its author, but that is not the same thing as thinking about what it means to you. Two critics, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, in a very famous article called 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946) put it like this:

In the spirit of a man who would settle a bet, the critic writes to [the poet] Eliot and asks what he meant [in his poem 'Prufrock'].

... our point is that such an answer to such an inquiry would have nothing to do with the poem 'Prufrock'; it would not be a critical inquiry. Critical inquiries, unlike bets, are not settled in this way. Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the Oracle.

Reading a text, interpreting a text, is not an activity that has a right or wrong answer. It is not like making a bet.

Second, whatever the 'oracle' author said is itself another text open to interpretation. A letter saying, 'I intended such and such' is not firm evidence. Not only could it be a lie, plain and simple, but it is also open to interpretation because it is written within a certain historical period, where certain ideas were dominant, and because we, perhaps centuries later, may know things that the author didn't (and, clearly, *vice versa*). Authors might have very astute things to say about their own work, but what they say is only as valid as what a reader might say in determining the meaning of a text. Interpreting their work, an author is doing the same job as anybody else looking at a text. Another way of thinking about this is to ask, 'Who owns words?' Wimsatt and Beardsley, discussing poetry, say that a text 'is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it'. They argue that authors might shape language, but that ultimately it is public property and readers may make of it what they will. This is not a modern idea: at the end of his long poem, *Troilus and Cressidye*, Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343/4-1400) wrote 'go little-book, go'. He knew that, once created, the poem was out of his hands, and people were free to interpret it in any way they wished.

If an author's comments about intention are not authoritative, biographies are even less useful, being, after all, only an interpretation of somebody's life. It will certainly inform the reader about the author and her or his period, but will not provide a 'correct interpretation' for a literary text.

(iii) Authorial presence

Authorial presence is perhaps the most difficult assumption to understand. The question 'In *Paradise Lost* Book 1, does Milton convince you that Satan is both attractive and corrupt?' and others like it are, in a way, very confused. For they conjure up the rather worrying image of Milton appearing to you and arguing passionately that *Paradise Lost* Book 1

shows Satan as both attractive and corrupt. Surely, it is the *text of Paradise Lost* Book 1 and how you read it that would convince you (or not), rather than Milton himself. A text does not magically bring the author into the room with you - writing is just marks on paper. More than that, the very presence of the writing shows up the *absence* of the author. If the author was actually there, she or he could simply talk to you: the written text itself implies their absence, like an empty chair at a celebratory meal. (Look in this book, and others, at all the moments where the text says 'As I have discussed . . .' or 'We said earlier . . .' In fact, none of these things are actually 'discussed' or 'said' at all; they are *written down*. Using the sorts of words that imply real speech is a way of suggesting that the author is actually there, present and talking to you. But this is metaphorical, not real. While you read this, I'm off somewhere else!)

Some critics argue that the author speaks *through* the text, but how could you tell when this was happening? In many novels or plays, several points of view are presented, for example through different characters. Which point of view is the author's? And even if there are passages written in the first person 'I', how do we know if this is the author? It is with such questions that Barthes's essay on the 'Death of the Author' begins. He finds part of a novel where it just isn't clear who is speaking. Is it the author's voice? The voice of a role the author is playing (as the narrator, or as 'the spirit of the age')? Is it always clear who, or what, is speaking? Is the author wearing a mask? Or, suddenly, does the 'real' author appear? His point is that if you are looking for the 'authentic' authorial meaning through a moment where the author 'speaks', it is, in fact, very hard indeed to pin down for certain *where* on the page that moment is.

If writers are absent, how could we ever get to grips with the 'authorial intention'? We can't ask them and we can't even find out if there is a part of the text which was written to tell us 'what they really meant'. With the person irrecoverable, it seems foolish to try to work out his or her intention. Instead, perhaps, we should make what we can of the text.

(iv) Simple evaluation

Apart from the question of what you are to evaluate, if you cannot trace authorial intention, *how* should you evaluate? Who sets the standards? Does the question 'How successfully does Jane Austen show the growth of her female characters?' mean there is some fixed model of how

successfully the growth of female characters *should* be shown? Or could you compare Jane Austen to another novelist of the period, Frances Burney (1752–1840), and judge who was better? The idea of judgement implies an objective neutrality that nobody could have and demands that everybody thinks in the same way. While it used to be thought that the job of the critic was to judge what ‘great works’ were and who the ‘great writers’ were, it is clear that judging a writer’s ‘success’ is more a result of the way the discipline has developed than a useful task in itself.

With these new ideas in mind, we could redraw the ‘traditional’ diagram of the relationship between text and meaning as follows (see Figure 7.2).

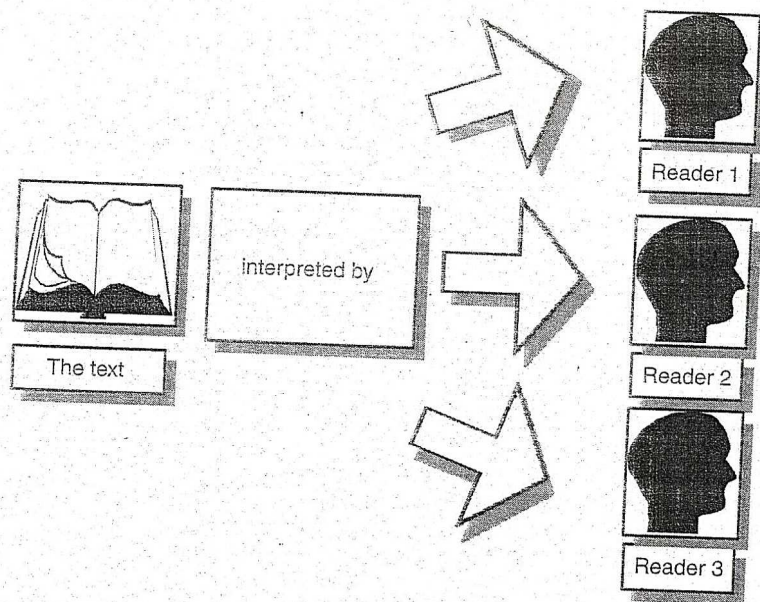


Figure 7.2 After the ‘death of the author’ texts are open to interpretations

The author, in saying what she or he meant by her or his work, can be seen as another reader, with an interpretation only as valid as that of any other person looking at the text. The author is no longer the all-important figure: The Author, as the saying goes, is Dead.

So why has the author always seemed so important?

Those who claim that the author is ‘dead’ also look at how the figure of the author was ‘born’, claiming this as another argument against authorial intention. The ‘author’ and the importance that the role has had in Western European culture was, like all ideas, invented. Of course, with broad concepts and categories of this sort it is impossible to say exactly when it was invented, but it has been argued very convincingly that this idea of the author came into being in or around the eighteenth century. This is obviously not to say that people didn’t write before this time, but that their sense of identity as an author and their relation to their texts were different. Mass printing in England began after William Caxton (c. 1415/24–c. 1491/2) introduced the first printing press in 1466 or 1467. Before this, who the author was simply wasn’t important for thinking about what things meant. Medieval stories and romances were almost always without named authors (Chaucer is an exception). *Gawain and the Green Knight* is anonymous, but people read it without knowing or caring who the author was. (In contrast, if present-day writers stay anonymous it is precisely because it *does* matter who they are: they might want to escape persecution, or paying taxes, or scandal, for example.)

The concept of the author as the ‘true source’ of meaning perhaps developed most fully during the eighteenth century: the period of the Industrial Revolution. During this time of massive change, writing became *property*, something that could be sold. It was possible to have a career as an author without a patron, living by selling what one wrote. Since ‘ownership’ of the words was important to generate income, the importance of attribution grew. Another major influence that fostered the idea of the author was the Romantic movement – a loose collection of poets, thinkers, philosophers and writers in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They focused on the created idea of the writer as *genius*, which didn’t just mean ‘very intelligent’ as it does today. A ‘genius’ was a person whose immense creative and artistic power was a conduit between unseen powers (of Nature, for example, or the Imagination) and the world of human beings. Not only did this focus attention on the ‘author’, the genius, but it became important to know who had this special ability and who didn’t.

The Romantic concept of the author also stressed that an author must be original. However, some people have cast doubt on the very possibility of originality. Whatever original idea an author might be trying to

convey, she or he only has a limited number of pre-existing counters – words – to use to do this, just as an artist has only a certain range of colours to paint with. Even new colours are only mixtures of old ones and although the range of colours is wide – the visible spectrum – it is also limited (try imaging a totally different colour that *no one has ever seen before*). Like colours, none of the words the author might choose are new: words are the only system of meaning that the author can use. If authors want to explain what original idea they ‘mean’, they can only use words that have pre-existing meanings, so the words will already have *shaped* what the author can say. (This view reverses the normal assumption that an author shapes language: it suggests that, in fact, language shapes authors.) On top of this, much literature is bound by generic conventions, so any work has, to some extent, to fit an already established pattern. In a thriller, for example, the murderer can either be captured or escape. In a way, this doesn’t leave much room for originality. These rules can be challenged and changed, of course, but this too relies on the rules, since rebellion has to rebel *against* something. These conventions are not part of the original intention of the author: the ‘original’ ideas are reshaped by traditions of writing.

So the ‘author’ is yet another invented category, and even the way this category is defined, as a ‘person who communicates original ideas’, is open to question. But what are the effects of this?

Consequences of the death of the author

If the author is dead and reading to discover her or his secret hidden intention is no longer the only logical course to take, there are new questions to ask. Perhaps one of the most important would be to ask how one might understand the idea of ‘author’ now. The ‘author’ might no longer be the source of meaning in a text, but it doesn’t mean that the term has become irrelevant. Knowing about an author does still tell us some things about a text: the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1926–1984) coined the term ‘author-function’ to describe the way the idea of the author is used. For example, an author’s name serves as a classification, as you can be fairly sure what sort of text, broadly understood in terms of style and period, you will find under the name ‘Emily Brontë’ or ‘Stephen King’. This is not to pre-empt the idea of meaning but to suggest that the name is used to group certain texts together. The author-function is also used, correctly or incorrectly, to ascribe value to

texts. When, every now and again, somebody claims to have discovered a new Shakespeare poem, there is more fuss than when a new poem by a less famous poet is discovered. Again, if you like the work of a certain novelist, you might buy another novel by the same writer. The author’s name also becomes a ‘reference tag’ for other, often quite vague things like style or themes: critics discuss ‘Aphra Behn’s style’ (1640–1689; British playwright, novelist and translator) or ‘Samuel Beckett’s philosophy’ (1906–1989; Irish writer). Sometimes the names of authors are used as the tags for a whole series of ‘big ideas’ – ‘Darwinism’ or ‘Marxism’, for example. These ideas may have little (or even nothing) to do with those individuals in history, but the ideas still come under the classification of their name, so powerful is the author-function. In none of these cases is the author necessarily a source of authority on the meaning of the text.

Perhaps most importantly, the ‘death of the author’ – or at least of their authority – leads to what Roland Barthes called ‘the birth of the reader’. I understand this to mean that a literary work does have a meaning, but it isn’t a puzzle or a secret to be found out, placed there in code by a genius author. Instead, it’s something that grows as an interaction between the readers and the text itself. Each reader is able – or should be able – to interpret and to produce an array of different and stimulating meanings. You shouldn’t be restricted by wondering what the author really meant. The meaning of a text lies not in its origin, but in its destination: in you, the readers. Understanding a text isn’t a matter of ‘divining the secret’ but of actively creating a meaning.

Nevertheless, the author’s intention is still endlessly referred to, sometimes to discount perfectly convincing and interesting readings of texts. It seems that many people want to find an authority to explain the text and provide the final answer. It is this wish for a final meaning that links the word ‘author’ with the word ‘authority’. This desire is particularly heightened in reading literature precisely because, I would argue, literature stimulates an unlimited proliferation of meanings. This idea, taken seriously, can seem quite threatening. If thinking about literature makes us think about the world, and there are no right answers about literature, are there any firm answers anywhere?

Summary

- It is often assumed that the author determines the meaning of a text. However, the reader also has a role to play.

- The conventional way of understanding a text as 'what the author intended' makes a number of questionable assumptions about meaning, biographical certainty, authorial presence and evaluation.
- These ideas are open to question: we all read differently, and even authors can only offer an interpretation of their own texts. There is no one fixed meaning to be found or judged.
- The idea of the author is an invention, developed in the eighteenth century.
- The term 'author' does still function as an indication of style, genre or, perhaps wrongly, of quality. However, the meaning in the text relies more on your interaction with it than on the writer's intention.

Metaphors and figures of speech

- What is a 'figure of speech'?
- What are metaphors and how do they work?
- How do they affect us?

When you study a literary text, you often concentrate on the way it uses language and 'figures of speech'. It is sometimes assumed that these figures of speech, and metaphors particularly, are just ornaments, there to decorate the texts and somehow show an author's skill. But they are much more important than this: they convey meanings at all sorts of levels, from the most mundane to the very deepest views we hold about ourselves and the world. Doing English involves not just appreciating figures of speech as ornaments, but looking at and questioning their significance.

Figures of speech everywhere

As a rule of thumb, a figure of speech is the use of words or a phrase in a way that isn't strictly true; the words have been 'turned away' from their literal sense and don't mean what a dictionary might say they mean. The technical term for figurative uses of language clearly reflects this: figures