

# Idea of Authorial Intent in “*The Intentional Fallacy*” by Wimsatt and Beardsley

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**Abstract**—“*The Intentional Fallacy*” by Wimsatt and Beardsley is a beautifully carved masterpiece to formulate and analyze the conception of authorial intent in any literary or non-literary text. According to multiple perspective there are multiple argument related to presence and absence of authorial intent in understanding of any text. Amidst such turmoil Wimsatt and Beardsley tried to pacify this argument by citing various exemplars from Romantic and Modernist texts. In simple terms “authorial intentionalism” refers to analyzing the text according to author’s intent behind the text. TS Eliot, Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks belong to the school of New Criticism and they deny the use of authorial intent in understanding any text. They state that author’s intentions are “neither available, nor desirable” to judge a literary work.

**Keywords**— Beardsley, Hermeneutics, Intentional fallacy, Modernist, Oscar Wilde, Roland Barthes, Romantic, TS Eliot, Wimsatt, “*The Pleasure of Imagination*”.

## I. INTRODUCTION

John Greene has stated very wisely that whatever symbol or metaphor the author uses in his writing should not be read in relation to the author’s intentions, reason being the writing or the text is meant to be read in its independence and is not concerned with what author intends to write in the text.

The term “Intentional fallacy” is coined by Wimsatt and Beardsley in an article with the same name. This concept became a controversial issue between Traditional who are referred to as pre-moderns critics, New Criticism who are modern critics and Hermeneutical who are post-modern critics. A fallacy as stated by Wimsatt and Beardsley is “invalid mode of reasoning” i.e. when a critic bases the interpretation of a literary text upon “external evidence” that stresses on author’s intentions, then the judgment and analysis of the text becomes fallacious. They state that author’s intentions are “neither available, nor desirable” to judge a literary work. This paper tries to ponder upon arguments by intentionalists and anti-intentionalists on author’s intention and judgment of a literary work, bringing in theories of Roland Barthes, Romantic’s expressionism, poet’s impersonality and so on.

## II. MAIN ARGUMENT

The main argument on which essay is formulated rests upon the clash between Romantic and Modernist conception of literature. Romantics define it as “vehicle of personal expression” and Modernists define it as “pure

linguistic act”. Wimsatt and Beardsley started by arguing that intentional fallacy is a romantic phenomenon as it depends upon expressionistic aspect of poetry. They quote Longinus who defines sublimity as “echo of great soul”. Also, Goethe focused upon author’s intention in order to perform constructive criticism of text. Similarly, Benedetto Croce stressed upon gazing work of art as “author” gazed it while producing it i.e. stressed on “author’s gaze” or “author’s intent”. In short he focuses on looking the text with author’s eyes. These pre-modernist beliefs were debased by New Criticism intentionalists like Wimsatt who saw work of art as a “verbal icon” that means the text speaks, it has its own soul and author is not required to give direction to the way of the reading the text. T.S. Eliot in “Tradition and Individual Talent” argued that the truthful criticism and “sensitive appreciation of text is directed upon poetry, not the poet”. Critics like C.S. Lewis and Tillyard also carry forward same formulation in “The Personal Heresy” (1939). Oscar Wilde in “Picture of Dorian Gray” revealed the aim of art i.e. to “reveal art” and “conceal artist” hence bestowing due importance and value to the text or art.

## III. REFERENCE TO T.S. ELIOT

Wimsatt and Beardsley developed various thesis on “intentional fallacy” starting with the view that “intention is neither desirable nor available” to judge a literary work. They are not against presence of author’s intent in construction of a work, rather they deny it as a “standard”

for judging a literary piece. For them intention doesn't constitute judgment of literary text.

Wimsatt in "Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited" argues that work must be evaluated on its merits, not on author's intention. For an instance, is author is writing a text for sole purpose of monetary gain then this intention of his doesn't. On the same point, intentionalists like Benedetto Croce and R.G. Collingwood would argue that intention is necessary in judging a literary work by focusing on Parodies. We witness, New Criticism focuses on semantics of text rather than its evaluation. Beardsley formulated distinction between authorial meaning and textual meaning which nullifies author's intent. He stated three conditions i.e. a) printing error changes meaning, b) after author's death meaning changes, e.g. in analysis of "...he raised his plastic hand" in poem "The Pleasures of the Imagination" by Mark Akenside we see variation in the meaning of the term "plastic" used in poem after the death of author; c) a text has multiple meanings, so author's intended meaning may go unnoticed. We notice that in all three conditions author's intent goes nullified. This parallels to H.P. Grice's distinction between "sentence meaning" and "speaker's meaning". Beardsley argued that multiple-meanings of text nullifies author's intentional meaning. Facing problems with "allusions" of Donne's poetry in T.S. Eliot's "Love song of J Alfred Prufrock", he proposed two approaches of "exegesis" and "genetic enquiry". New Criticism focuses on the "internal evidence" i.e. syntax, semantics of poem, whereby marginalizing the other two evidences i.e. "external evidence" which is also "private" i.e. information deduced from letters, journals etc. conveying reasons, context of poem; and "intermediate evidence" which bestows private or semi-private meanings e.g. words used by coterie. Controversy as registered in Beardsley's "Intentions and Interpretation: A Fallacy Revived" is whether line "sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song" in T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" alludes to Prothalamion. Anyways, relation between allusion and intention is highly debatable and Wimsatt and Beardsley argues that "notes" of allusion of any poem should be considered as part of the main composition.

#### IV. DRAMATIC SPEAKER VS AUTHOR

Furthering this argument, they tried to build a distinction between dramatic speaker and the author. Anti-intentionalists claim that if poem is expression of personal emotions, then that emotions should be not confused with author's emotions because they are emotions of "dramatic speaker". Beardsley stated J.L. Austin's speech-act-theory to distinguish between "performances" of act and its "representation". Accordingly, Beardsley affirmed that "lyrical poems" of Wordsworth are representational and

not performing one, so one should focus on speaker and not on Wordsworth because linguistic work has quality of being "self-sufficient linguistic entity" and poem is a "verbal icon" which belongs to "public domain" and not to the poet.

#### V. REFERENCE TO BARTHES' "DEATH OF THE AUTHOR"

Furthermore, they focus on Barthes's concept of writing which dysfunctions speech in "Death of an Author". This constitutes that written work has no restraint of authorial intent, it is self-explanatory and have multiple meanings. Focusing on autonomous existence of literary work, they rejected Anand K. Coomaraswamy's artistic or moral evaluation of work of art, claiming that work of art is not meant to convey any morality and is free from "authorial intent". As in Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray", one could neither question the morality of artwork nor its worthiness of preservation because it promoted theory of "art for art's sake".

#### VI. HERMENEUTICAL BELIEF FOR THE AUTHORIAL INTENT

To refute these ideas of New Criticism, the postmodernist Hermeneutical theory raised the flag of "authorial intent's" necessity to understand a work. One critic quoted that intention is necessary to understand poem's meaning because "interpretation" is a part of "evaluation". E.D. Hirsh with essays like "In Defense of the Author" formulated importance of author's intentions and socio-political contexts in analyzing a literary work.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

To conclude, after the publication of "Intentional Fallacy", "poetic analysis" was given more importance than "biographical criticism" focusing on the "internal evidence". The traditional way of analyzing literary text by relating it to author's life got debunked and focus was laid on "objective criticism" of Wimsatt and Beardsley. With advent of New Criticism, center shifted from author to text. They did not denied the presence of author's intent as the "source" of production but denied using it as base for understanding poem. Even T.S. Eliot propounded theory of "poet's impersonality" in "Tradition and Individual Talent". F.R. Leavis too formulated that socio-economic contexts are not necessary to understand a poem or any literary text.

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