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Beardsley and the Implied Author (Abstract)

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Some theorists on literary interpretation have suggested a connection between Monroe C. Beardsley's anti-intentionalism and hypothetical intentionalism based on an implied author. However, a full exploration has never been attempted. I undertake this task in this paper. A close reading of Beardsley reveals that he assumes something very similar to the implied author in interpretation. I distinguish five types of fictional works in terms of their narrative mode and show that my claim stands in at least four of the five types. The significance of my argument lies in exposing the above version of authorism in anti-intentionalism.

Beardsley is generally perceived as advocating the irrelevance of authorial intention to literary interpretation. The common interpretation of his theory is that work-meaning is generated by linguistic conventions, with intention playing no role in meaning-determination. All the interpreter needs is knowledge of public, linguistic conventions in order to recover textual meaning.

Nevertheless, when dealing with the problem of interpretation, Beardsley explicitly talks about attributing textual meaning to a fictional speaker. Although he does not elaborate on the nature of this speaker, clues scattered in his writings point to the striking similarity of this theoretical apparatus to an implied author. The key lies in his presumption that every fictional work must have an ultimate speaker to whom meaning inferred from the text should be attributed. This claim is almost the core of an implied author theory of interpretation.

A difficulty in classifying Beardsley's view as a version of the implied author position is that his characterization of the story's presenter might apply better to the story's narrator than to its implied author. To test this, I examine different types of narrative modes to see whether the fictional speaker merges with the implied author in each of these scenarios.

The first factor to consider for classifying narrative modes is whether the narrator's presence is explicit or implicit. The narrative scenario in which the narrator is implicit can be further divided into two sub-types: either the story is told from an omniscient viewpoint or centers on the experience of a third-person character. In either case, the story is not told by any of the characters in the story; rather, it is told by an implicit speaker whose words the work purports to be. It seems reasonable to identify this fictional speaker with the implied author, for both function as the subject to which textual meaning is attributed.

As for the narrative mode in which the narrator is explicit, this involves first-person narratives. In these, either the narrator is reliable or unreliable. When the narrator is unreliable, a transcendental perspective is required in determining the text's meaning, because what is said ultimately in the work is not equivalent to what is literally said by the unreliable narrator. It follows that an implicit speaker has to be assumed and she again coincides with the implied author.

Where the narrator is reliable but textual meaning transcends what is literally expressed, an implicit speaker is at play again. This narrative scenario is thus better classified as a case in

which the narrator's presence is implicit. This leaves us with the narrative scenario in which the narrator is a reliable spokesperson for the implied author.

The identification of the narrator with the implied author in the case last mentioned is controversial. The crucial difference between them is that the former is dramatized in the story while the latter is not. I accept that the narrator here is not happily called an implied author, though I also point out several similarities between the two.

Finally, I discuss four complications to my argument. The first concerns multiple points of view in a story. To accommodate this kind of narrative, Beardsley could argue that an implicit narrator is needed to explain the definite meaning concealed behind what is literally said by different characters. The second complication is about the ontological status accorded to the narrator and the implied author. It might be objected that the two reside in different fictional worlds and this is what makes their merging impossible. But it is questionable whether this is a definitional feature of the implied author; moreover, the interpreter can take the implied author to be an instrumentalist concept and hence avoid talk about the ontological status of fictional entities. The third complication claims that versions of the implied author position developed by philosophers tend to be based on a contextualist ontology of literature; however, Beardsley's account is acontextual. This is not true, for Beardsley has exhibited contextualist leanings in his writings. Finally, it has been objected that the formalist resources Beardsley has are not enough to guarantee a single right interpretation. But if Beardsley is actually a contextualist, contextual constraints will come into play and raise the chance of getting a single right interpretation.

The article concludes by reflecting on the significance of the misrepresentation of anti-intentionalism: it is the intention of the actual author which anti-intentionalism is against. The position in question is actually developed in an intentionalist framework based on the implied author.

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