Robert Eaglestone, *Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 75-85.

7 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

Eaglestone's Summary, pp. 85-86

- 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.

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.

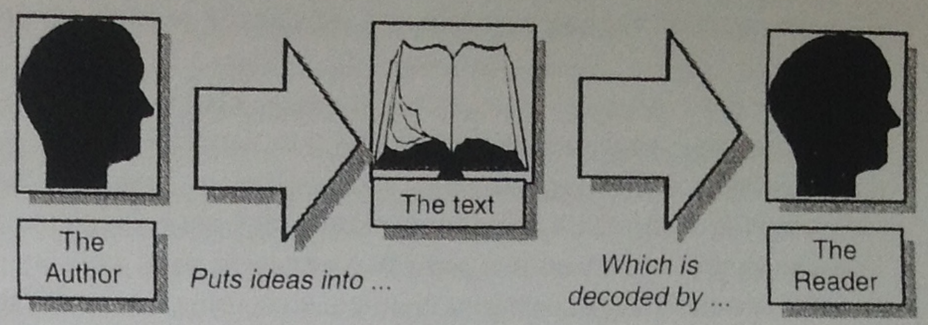

Figure 7.1 **The 'traditional' approach**

(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).

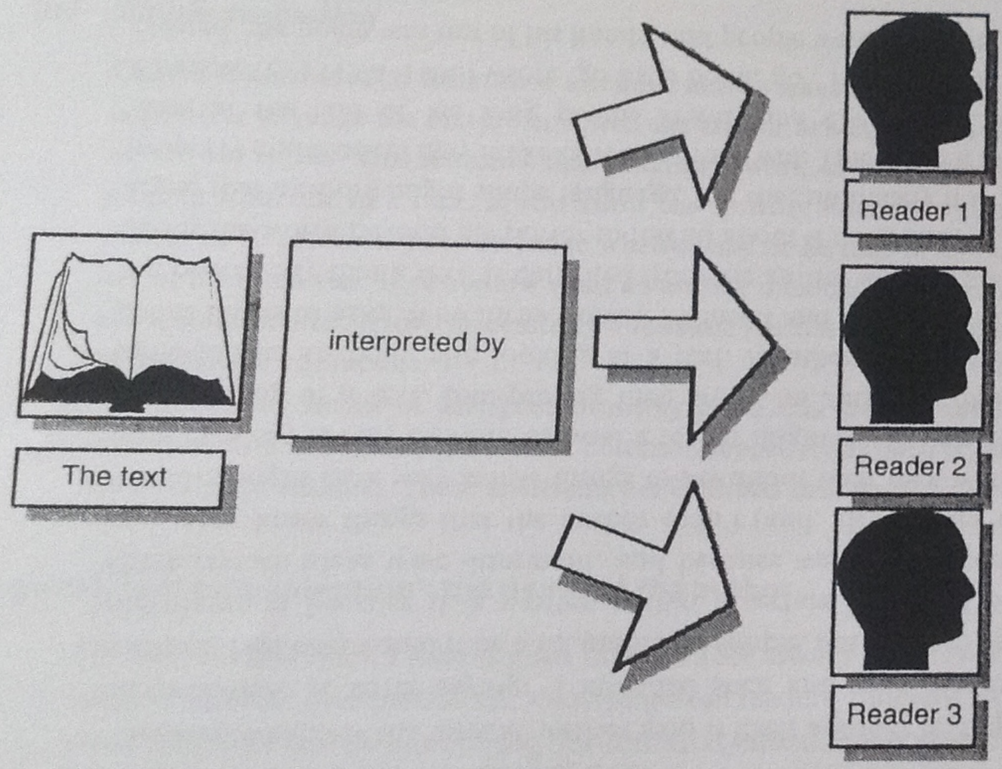

Figure 7.2 **After the 'death of the author' texts are open to interpretations**

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?