

Get a bigger hamme

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 28 Dec 2002

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Michael Straight — 28 Dec 2002, 22:56

On Mon, 23 Dec 2002, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

I cannot agree. Authorial intent is not to be dismissed so casually.

Propagandists of one stripe or another have historically cited respected, even revered, sources in support of their cause. The Bible is a good example. Verses can be (and have been) quoted from it that would seem to justify a whole host of evils, from slavery to war to genocide. The Nazis quoted Nietzsche. Madison and Jefferson are often cited in church/state debates by atheists and believers alike as authorities in support of opposing agenda. Authorial intent, where it can be discerned, has everything to do with it. Quotes out of context and those that are not representative of the whole distort the meaning of the work.

I have to say that this cracks me up. The difference between a bunch of folks sitting around talking about which interpretation of a story makes for the most fun reading and the examples you cite is so vast, I feel like we need totally different words to describe them.

Authorial intent matters when you care deeply about what the author was trying to say. (e.g. biblical interpretation for Christians). You may have a keen interest in what Wolfe was trying to do in the Short Sun books, but maybe Chris has a keen interest in coming up with what he thinks is a more fun reading.

The important part is that this is all for fun. We're not gonna use the results to decide who lives and who dies.

-Rostrum

Josh Geller — 28 Dec 2002, 23:03 · follows Michael Straight

On Sat, 28 Dec 2002, Michael Straight wrote:

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For us, now.

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results to decide who lives and who dies.

We're not. So far.

Hopefully no one ever will. But who can predict the future?

Give it time: another Thirty Years War might be fought over the opinions expressed on this list.

Never underestimate the power of human stupidity.

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Michael Straight — 31 Dec 2002, 07:38 · follows Josh Geller

On Sat, 28 Dec 2002, Josh Geller wrote:
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Um....well. Ok, even given that mind-bogglingly unlikely scenario, why would it be more important that we talk about what Wolfe originally intended instead of about interpretations some people like better than his original intent?

-Rostrum

Matthew Weber — 31 Dec 2002, 17:15 · follows Michael Straight

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Um....well. Ok, even given that mind-bogglingly unlikely scenario, why would it be more important that we talk about what Wolfe originally intended instead of about interpretations some people like better than his original intent?

-Rostrum

Assuming that "original intent" is a thing that can be known in the first place--even if the author's still alive, s/he may not tell the truth, or may have forgotten, might think it unimportant, etc.

The New Criticism is an established literary fact, and kicking against it will prove to be more trouble than it's worth. Not to say that authorial intent is unimportant, but it's not the Grail: nobody knows all the reasons why they do things (or psychotherapy wouldn't be necessary). There's a lot in any author's work that they might not have consciously put there; why not take the time to tease it out?

Please note that the New Crit is NOT a free pass to spin isogeses about Severian as a drag

queen, Herbert Hoover in disguise, or a Fungi from Yuggoth.

Matt

The fault is great in man or woman
Who steals a goose from off a common;
But what can plead that man's excuse
Who steals a common from a goose?
The Tickler Magazine, 1 Feb. 1821

Chris — 31 Dec 2002, 17:57 · follows Matthew Weber

There is also the general feeling going into it (not to say that it is the sole reason behind what you term "The New Criticism") that the work should stand on its own; the roots of what is to be interpreted from the text should be *in* the text (or, I suppose, body of texts) and if the author has anything further to say to explain what he meant, he should have somehow put that in the text in the first place.

There are plenty of arguments that can be made against this, and I won't dispute them. However, I suspect it's a sentiment that Wolfe himself shares. I've always gotten the feeling that he's been reluctant to answer these questions about his work because he wants them to stand on their own, and that he's made uncomfortable by the prospect of adding something that will alter or "fix" the reader's interpretation. This also helps account, I think, for how upset he gets about even the smallest unintentional error that he might make in the text (I seem to recall him talking about one in the end of the Long Sun series, in the afterword or thereabouts...) - perhaps he doesn't feel that his word, after the fact, is in itself a completely adequate fix.

Tangentially, I tend to read what an author has to say about his work anyway. With Wolfe I find it rewarding. The worst experience I had with it, though, was reading what Faulkner had to say about "The Sound and the Fury" and finding out that some of the things I found most masterful were in fact completely incidental, and that if he'd had his full way with the story (the printer imposed certain limitations on him) I would have been keenly disappointed with the result. Sometimes, you just don't want to know what the author really meant.

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Joe Cilluffo — 31 Dec 2002, 19:54 · follows Chris

Chris wrote:

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I seem to recall that UOTNS is an example of this, that his editor talked him into the volume to explain the prior four books, and that GW acquiesced to this against his own judgment.

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I tend to agree with Chris and those listmembers who have voiced similar feelings that it depends on what you are reading the work for. If you are reading or analyzing for your personal enjoyment, then the author's "true" intent is irrelevant -- one of my favorite Yeats poems resonates with me deeply on a personal level even though the genesis of the poem for Yeats himself was civil unrest in his beloved Ireland.

Even when you are analyzing a work, the author's intent isn't necessarily relevant to a cogent or valid analysis. For example, it is possible to enjoy *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and to find textual support for the respective superiority of each of Basil, Lord Henry and Dorian despite which of them Wilde himself thought and intended to be most admirable. Another fine example of how irrelevant authorial intent may sometimes be would be propagandistic works -- the filmmakers who helmed *Birth of a Nation* or *Triumph of the Will* certainly intended them to portray the South and Nazi Germany respectively in great lights but that doesn't preclude analysts from holding them and saying "see, here is a fine example of what was wrong the South," despite the fact that the authors intended them to be the opposite.

However, one area in which you pretty much cannot ignore authorial intent is if you are trying to determine what "really" happened in a fictional work -- if you are trying to determine whether Severian is really Jesus and GW says "no, he's a Christian, but not Christ," if your concern is determining the "truth" of what "really" happened in the work the author is the only potentially valid source of truth. Two points here. First, if you are not trying to determine what "really" happened then what the author intended is irrelevant. For example, if what you are interested

in is whether Severian

can be viewed as a Christ figure, then whether Gene Wolfe meant him to be one is irrelevant. The difference being whether you are looking at the fictional universe in which the story takes place (is Severian Jesus?) or whether you are just looking at the work from a literary standpoint (is Severian a Christ figure). If literary analysis is what you are reading for then whether the author intended something to be allegorical or humorous is irrelevant to whether something indeed serves as an allegory or source of humor (hence all those awful sitcoms on TV...). The second point is that I say the author is only a potentially valid source because it may be the case that there is no ultimate source of the truth, even when considering the fictional universe, because at the time of putting pen to paper the author may not have planned out the matter at issue, in which case he or she is making a guess just as much as you are. For example, would Severian have slept with Dorcas anyway if he had known who she was? Or are there any people left on Lune during Severian's time or Typhon's reign? These are questions about the fictional universe but which may not have an answer b/c GW never pondered them or never included them in the text (and anything not in the text, at least by reference or implication, for all intents and purposes does not exist).

Anyway, that's my two cents.

Happy New Year to all!

- Joe a/k/a Shell