

# “The Return of the Repressed”: A Critique of Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Intentional Fallacy*

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## **Abstract**

*Literary theory is a tool through which literature is analysed and studied. There are pluralities of polemics of literary theory that are proposed by theorists in their attempt to analyse and study literature. However, each polemic of literary theory has left a gap to be desired for a critical study. Most theorists of literature appear to be unsuccessful in defending the ideological grid (school) of literary theory they claim to vindicate. The four major ideological grids of literary theory are the author, reader, text and context and every theory of literature is an attempt to show the efficacy of one ideological grid over another under the interpretive analytical condition. This paper, therefore, critiques Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Intentional Fallacy* as an essay that claims to have vindicated the text over other elements, especially the author, by undermining the supremacy of the intentionality and the intentional predicates of the author in literary interpretations. The paper, however, by demonstrating the Return of the Repressed, shows how unsuccessful the task undertaken by Wimsatt and Beardsley ends up by pointing out how through the unconscious, they reveal the aporias of their ideological school. The paper therefore concludes that every ideology of literary theory is, and at equal measure, implicated in every interpretive process. The banished ideological school is not successfully banished but unconsciously stored in the psyche of the literary analyst and returned to take its position later in the study and analysis of literature.*

Key words: Ideological grid, literary theory, text, author, reader

## **Introduction**

This paper examines the effective value of each of the four major ideological grids (schools) of literary theory, namely the author, reader, context and text, or to use the synonymous terms introduced by Abrahams (1953) as Universe, Work, Artist and Audience. Adams (1971) also describes these theoretical

coordinates as expressive (author), objective (text), mimetic or universe (context) and pragmatic (reader). The problematic of the study therefore, is informed by the contradictory polemics about the efficacy of one approach among the listed ones over another, in producing desired effect under analytical condition. This has created series of conceptual confusions in literary scholarship or in literary theory and criticism. The paper highlights the tenets of each of these four ideological grids of literary theory and reviews their implications on a study and analysis of literary text. The paper further exemplifies the (in)efficacy of each approach by analysing Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Intentional Fallacy* which advocates the superiority of one ideological grid over others in analysing a piece of literature. The essay chosen is analysed considering its advocacy for what it calls an "objective criticism" over other approaches. The aporia in the essay is considered to the extent in which it undermines the claim made by the theorists. The paper, therefore, demonstrates the return of a banished element(s) in the analysis, thereby showing how unsuccessful the task of vindicating one element or two elements over others has been carried out by the theorists.

### **The Major Ideological Schools of Literary Theory**

Literary theory is a link between the text and the reader and there are four major approaches to studying such a linkage. These approaches informed the departmentalization of the schools of literary theory and literary criticism into four. In recent times, through these departmentalized schools, theory has massively enriched literary scholarship by inducing readers and critics to pursue different interpretations of the literary documents and follow them to any possible logical conclusion. The first of such schools to consider here is the Romantic Humanist, who holds that poetry (literature) is the product of the artist's mind as Wordsworth (1944) would argue, or, as record of the mind of the artist as Shelley (2003) puts it. Keats (1954) argues in the same line with Wordsworth and Shelly in that he compares imagination with Adam's dream, which Adam woke and found it to be truthful. Coleridge (1973) also likened the question of what is poetry to what is a poet. Sometimes, for these arguments, the approach is described as Historical or Biographical approach. Guerin, W. L. et-al (2011) are among those that see the approach as a method of analysing literature in a way that the work could be analysed as a reflection of the author's life and time. This approach tends to establish a mutually interrelated meaning between the literary text and the life of its author. Issues like date, time and events in the literary text are symbiotically juxtaposed with the time, place and events in the life of the author. The author-based

approach considers a literary work as either a biography of its author or his pseudo-autobiography.

Modern literary theorists such as Barthes (2001), Foucault (1984), Derrida (1976), Eliot (1972) on their part, advocate a text-based or text-oriented approach of literary analysis. This theoretical foundation is influenced by the textual science that is applied on legal and divine documents. Most of the chief theorists of this scientific approach were driven into their advocacy by theories like Russian Formalism, New Criticism and the Poststructuralist Movement. For them, a text is a self-sufficient object for analysis and interpretation. A work of art or literature is independent of its origin (author) or destination (reader). Their arguments suggest that, as soon as the text is released, the writer ceases the control over its meaning and interpretation. Some of them that align to the new critical idea hold the notion of 'if you want to know the text; you have to go to the text'. By this statement, they obliterate extra-textual paraphernalia of a literary piece and place more emphasis on the formal structural features of the text. Their methods suggest that the important defining characteristics of a text are squarely within the text and not outside it.

Some of the theorists of literary criticism are of the opinion that the reader is the determiner of meaning of a literary text. For instance, Wolfgang (1978) and Fish (1980) on their side, in what they call "Reception Theory," advocate the reader-based approach to literary analysis. They hold that the conscious experiences of the reader are the most vital determinants of meaning. Fish (1980) argues that nobody comes to a text directly; rather, readers come to a text through what he calls the interpretive community. Wolfgang (1978) argues in the same line with Fish. He holds that a text comes to the reader incomplete; it comes with what he describes as voids, gaps, silences, etc. It is the reader that schematizes the text, meaning that the reader bridges the gaps, removes the voids and the silences in order, for the reader, to arrive at the meaning of the text. Therefore, it is worthwhile to say that their argument thinned away both the author and the text as primary elements in literary analysis.

The context-oriented approach to literary criticism is advocated by scholars like Macherey (1966), Eagleton (1976), and Greenblatt (1989). The approach could be said to have been called for, by a heterogeneous groups of literary theorists and their theories that reject the self-reliance of a literary text. For instance, schools of criticism like Marxism, Post-colonialism, New Historicism, and Feminism have all placed emphasis on the contexts and

institutional circumstances of literature as the most vital elements for arriving at the meaning of the literature. They prioritized the institutional, historical, political, and ideological shades of the literature under analysis.

### **Literary Theory: an Elusive Generic Discourse**

Genre is mostly disturbing factor in any study of literature. This is not unconnected with the rigidity and, at the same time, delicacy of the term. Arguably, literary theory could, to some extent, be regarded as a genre of writing with varying degrees of subgenres. Literary theory could be called a genre for it includes different activities that characterize its discourse. Such activities include philosophizing, historicizing, bio-graphing, etc. Anderson defines genre as a “specific type of artistic or cultural composition identified by codes which the audience recognize them” (35). This means that genre is a nomenclature given to certain compositions that share similar characteristics or identities. Abrahams and Geoffrey hold that “the genre into which literary works have been grouped at different times are very numerous, and the criteria on which the class significations have been based are highly variable” (134). This means that there are many criteria that guide the classification of certain works to a particular genre and these criteria vary. We may say, for instance, the linguistic theories of criticism could be described as the subgenre of the literary theory that emphasizes the language of literature rather than other elements. Also, we may argue that those theories that emphasize the importance of the external structures of literature over the internal structures could be called a subgenre of literary theory that is characterized by emphasis on the external elements of literature. It is in this regard that Derrida (1980) argues that there is always a genre and genres, meaning that a particular work of literature can belong to one genre or more. One may think that a work of literature is only the product of the creative process. Arnold (1969), however, debunks this by incorporating the critical process (literary theory) into the works of literature, in fact, with more emphasis on the critical process than the creative process.

It is in this respect that Derrida (1980) maintains that every text must be identified with a particular genre and there would never be a text which can elude being classified to a particular genre. This means that if a theory is a text, it must therefore be classified as a genre. However, it is also part of Derrida's argument that “there is always an inclusion and exclusion with regard to genre in general” (212); and “that no text can actually fulfil its own generic designation” (214). With these arguments, it implies that in reading an essay

that claims to be vindicating the author-based analysis, the reader is likely to find the reflection of either text-based arguments or reader-based arguments. This implies that by way of presenting an argument in a theory, the theorist is likely to destroy or attack his own writing. This goes well with Derrida's argument mentioned earlier. Burke (1992) claims in the same vein that, "...when a genre or a mode of writing advertises its inherent problematic, it is thereby denying or destroying itself" (189). Barratt argues that "all genres readily borrow from the other genres or modes. For example, the reader-based approach borrows from the text-based approach, the context-based approach borrows from the author-based approach" (55).

### **Wimsatt W.K. and Beardsley, M.C. (1972) *The Intentional Fallacy***

*The Intentional Fallacy* according to Wimsatt and Beardsley occurs when a critic puts too much emphasis on personal, biographical, or what they call the "external information" (312) when analysing a literary text. Their essay which is so titled is among the master essays that could be linked to the new critical idea in which the theorists call out the readers; who just go through a literary text with the hope of figuring out what the author intended to write down. According to these theorists, authorial intent is not the most important about a literary text, thus, "...the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art..." (334). This means that works of literature are independent of their origins and the origins are never the criteria for interpreting the works. Interestingly enough, they insist that as soon as the text is released, the author relinquishes the "power to intend about it or to control it" (335). They suggest that what is important is the text itself plus what they call "its magical stew of literary devices and structures." Wimsatt and Beardsley describe the method of the Romantic Humanist which relates literature to the intention of its author as "confusion between the poem and its origin" (334). In what they call the "external information", or subjective criticism, they liken the romantic biographical approach to what they relate to the "Genetic Fallacy" in philosophical studies. Their idea is termed in the present-time literary criticism as the "Principle of Autonomy" by which they argue that a literary text "is a self-sufficient entity, whose properties are decisive in checking interpretations and judgement" (335). This quote suggests that a literary text is purely a composition of sign, symbol or language; not a biographical or contextual property. In this argument, they classify criticism into two, namely "the criticism of poetry and the author psychology" in which they attribute the former to their advocacy and the later to the romantic humanist perspective. A

text, in their argument, is a linguistic product and as they assert, “the design or the intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of art” (335). In their arguments, “judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. A piece of writing as they suggest, “should not mean but be” (335) and it can explain itself through its medium: language or words; which they argue that, it discloses “the character and the authority” (337) of the text and not the external structures like the author, the context or the reader. A text is, according to them, the strongest orphan that doesn't require its father any longer after birth.

However, Wimsatt and Beardsley, in their arguments, seem to have had, in the words of Derrida (1976), *aporia* since they admit that the author can have intention to the extent of even describing the author's intention, thus, “intention is design or plan in the author's mind” (335). In contrast, the author for Foucault (1984) is never a personality who can be linked to human attributes like “intention,” but the writer is only a functionality or any principle that governs the text. With Foucault's argument, it may be said that even the text and the context, that are not subjectivities in the text, can be described as authors provided that they function as the overriding principle that governs the text. Foucault further argues that the fear of the plurality of meaning is what informed the need to relate the work to the intentions of its author so as to limit or constrain the proliferation of meanings of the text, an idea which Foucault himself frowns at.

Again, they argue that the poem after being written “is not the critic's own and not the author's” (335). This, coupled with the method of “objective” approach they are identified with, implies that, no subjectivity will be attached to the poem in that it is a “self-sufficient” or “autonomous” object. However, Wimsatt and Beardsley contradict their claim for “autonomous” model of reading or interpretation when they claim that, once published, the poem “goes about the world” (335) and it “belongs to the public” (335). The question here is who is the public? One may guess that the reader or the reading community is the answer to this question. This makes their contention mentioned above become rather self-contradictory. What is claimed to be detached from personality or subjectivity is again, being thrown back to another subject, the world or the reader.

Moreover, Wimsatt and Beardsley differentiate between the intrinsic and the extrinsic approaches to literary interpretations. In what they describe as “internal and the external evidence for the meaning of the poem,” they classify the evidences the critic may need to interpret the text into the internal and the external evidences like it is popularly done in literary discourses, the

idea which Greenblatt (2005) debunks; thus, there is not a clear distinction between the inside and the outside of a text. Foucault consolidates Greenblatt by disagreeing that the author is “outside” evidence in literary interpretation. The author, instead, is a fundamental figure, inside and outside his work. With this, it means that the binary structural classification of the evidences into the internal and the external is not a valid one as such is an attempt to give the text a primal or transcendental status.

In the cases raised here, Wimsatt and Beardsley fall into the trap of language. The language escapes the *conscious*, as Freud (1935) argues, “it is no longer in the control of its users” (55). It may be argued here that they appear to be unconsciously, as put by Freud, contradicting the argument they presented earlier in the essay. In the first case, admitting that the author can have intention is suggesting that the element they banished from the beginning has come back to take its place strategically in the analysis. If the author really has intention, the intention must reflect in the analysis, since, as they argue, that the task of the critic is to understand those intentions as the text expresses them. It means that the text can express the authorial intention. It shows that Wimsatt and Beardsley appear to be advocating the approach they describe as “Fallacy”, misconception or mistake. Secondly, this essay is considered among the masterpieces of the new critical idea that advocates the detachment of the text from all sorts of subjectivity and external structures. However, by saying that the text “belongs to the public”(335), these theorists are deviating from what they claim to be vindicating, that is, the text-based analysis. They seem to have jumped into an advocacy for a subjective analysis, the reader-based analysis or the context-based analysis. Finally, the distinction between the intrinsic and the extrinsic elements of literature they argue to have existed is not a valid argument since what one may consider as the external element may turn to be found inside the text.

### **Conclusion**

This paper concludes on a paradigmatic note that no theorist has, in a sustaining conceptual discourse, succeeded in vindicating the approach s/he tries to vindicate. This is because in the discourse of thinning out one or more element(s), the element(s) is unconsciously stored somewhere in the psyche of the analyst and unconsciously returns to take a strategic position in the analysis of literature. This idea is what Freud calls “the return of the repressed” (77) which exactly this paper seeks to exemplify through an analysis of Wimsatt and Beardsley (1972)*The Intentional Fallacy*, an essay

that prioritizes the efficacy of the text over the author under any literary analytical condition. The study shows how the essayists slipped away from vindicating the text against the author, to jumping unconsciously into the advocacy for an author-based analysis which they set out to attack.

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