



## English

We've all been in an English class when someone has raised the objection: 'but surely the writer didn't actually mean all this?'. Often the objection is meant to be a fatal one, and the implied follow-up is, 'so what's the point in the whole endeavour?'. The objection is often made facetiously in the classroom, but it is a serious one and deserves serious answers. The question of authorial intention in literary texts – which is a version of the question, 'is what I am seeing in this text really *there*, or is it my own invention?' – has long been one of the greatest challenges to the practice of closely analysing literary texts on their own terms; that is, paying close attention to the language and form of a text in order that such attention might tell the reader something illuminating about the text itself.

Here are the two Romantic poets, Byron and Shelley, discussing the issue back in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. See how Byron makes the very same objection we're used to from English class:

*Shelley* Well then, what do we mean by a beautiful passage or line? Is not a line... a whole, and only as a whole, beautiful in itself? as, for instance, 'How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank.' Now, examining this line, we perceive that all the parts are formed in relation to one another, and that it is consequently a whole. 'Sleep', we see, is a reduplication of the pure and gentle sound of sweet; and as the beginning of the former symphonises with the beginning of the latter, so also the *l* in moonlight prepares one for the *l* in sleep, and glides gently into it; and in the conclusion, one may perceive that the word 'bank' is determined by the preceding words, and that the *b* which it begins with is but a deeper intonation of the two *p*'s which come before it; sleeps upon this slope, would have been effeminate; sleeps upon this rise, would have been harsh and unharmonious.

*Byron* Heavens! do you imagine, my dear Shelley, that Shakespeare had any thing of the kind in his head when he struck off that pretty line? If anyone had told him all about your *p*'s and *s*'s, he would have just said, 'Pish!'.<sup>1</sup>

## The task

**Our task for you is to write a response to Byron, or to the pupil in the class above.** There are no restrictions on what that response can be in terms of form or content. But we ask that central to your response is at least one example of a literary text, broadly defined, which you think through and with as you make your argument. It can be anything from a line of verse, like Shelley's, to a whole play or novel.

You may wish to argue that writers do mean everything we can spot in texts; you may wish to argue that they don't, but that close literary analysis is still worthwhile; you may choose to argue that analysis of the kind Shelley engages in above is pointless, but that studying literary texts such as Shakespeare's is nonetheless of value, for different reasons; or you may even wish to argue that there is no value in studying English literature at all!

Similarly, answers can be provided in essay form; dialogue form like Shelley and Byron's discussion above; even something off the page, like a video or a podcast. There are many ways of tackling this question, and teaming up with someone who takes a different view to you, and recording a researched debate, could be a very fruitful route to go down. Be as creative as you want to be!

## Resources

Each of the below pieces of writing provides a certain way of understanding and attending to authorial intention in the study of literary texts. You don't need to read all of these, or any – they are there to help get you thinking if you would like to use them.

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<sup>1</sup> From Mary Shelley, 'Byron and Shelley on the Character of Hamlet' (1830)

M. C. Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt, 'The Intentional Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review*, 54.3 (1946), 468–88. In this famous essay from the '40s, two American literary critics argue that the intention of the author in a text is not readily recoverable, and secondary to the meaning of the text itself.

Stanley Cavell, 'A Matter of Meaning It', in *Must We Mean What We Say* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 213–37. An essay on meaning and intention which begins as a reaction against the ideas of Wimsatt and Beardsley.

Jonathan Culler, 'In defence of overinterpretation', in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini pp. 109–24. A meditation on the validity or otherwise of interpretation in literary study.

Claire Tomalin, *Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man* (London, 2007). A short example of biographical criticism: where attention to Hardy's poems is driven by biographical information.

In order to access these readings, you will need to [sign up using this link](#). We will then send you the readings by email.