

Authorial Intent Verses Reader Response: Who Controls The Meaning?

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Prepared by John S. Bohannon, www.weccva.com / www.lakecountryandbeyond.com

What is meaning, and who controls it, the author or the reader?

- Living in a sea of relativity
- There is no absolute truth

Illustration- *Wizard of Oz* (movie) based off a book by L. Frank Baum

- Dorothy and her cute dog Toto overcome the odds and defeat the powerful and scary bad guys (the wicked witches) with the help of some nice new friends.
 - Historical Background to the book and movie
 - Hot political debate in America
 - Should America continue to use the gold standard as the basis for the U.S. dollar or whether she should switch to silver?
 - Historical Context- the main line of the book, "*Follow the yellow brick road*," may refer to the central political issue of the day.
 - Dorothy discovers upon meeting the wizard of Oz that he was a fraud—after following the yellow brick road.
 - Dorothy's hope lay in her shoes—which were silver in the book.
 - Hollywood changed them to ruby so they would show up better in color.
 - So the book may actually be a political satire.
 - Gold is measured by the ounce, which is abbreviated oz.
 - Characters represent different segments of America
 - Scarecrow- farmers (no brains)
 - Tin Woodsman- factory workers (no heart)
 - Cowardly lion- political leadership of the country
 - Wicked witch of the East- the East Coast establishment
 - Wicked witch of the West-the West Coast establishment
 - Hero- Middle America- Dorothy from Kansas
- Is it okay to interpret the story as a simple tale of good triumphing over evil?
- Did the author intend for it to be read as a political satire? (Satire = A literary work in which irony, derision, or wit in any form is used to expose folly or wickedness)
- Does the author have any say so in what the story means?
- What is the meaning of the story? Who determines the meaning?

The debate of our day:

1. Traditional View (first half of the 20th century)- the approach to interpreting any literature, biblical or secular, was to assume that the author determines the meaning and the reader's job is to find that meaning.
2. More Recent Trend (last half of the 20th century)- the traditional view has been challenged where, literally, critics now argue that the reader, not the author, is the one that determines the meaning of the text (book)

- Affects on Biblical Interpretation- Secular literary criticism has entered into the field of biblical interpretation. Biblical scholars wrestle with the question, *What is meaning?* Some have concluded that meaning only applies as a reader interacts with the text—that it takes both the reader and the text to produce meaning. The author is no longer involved. The author has been removed from the equation!
 - Reader Response- the *reader* is the main character in the determination of meaning. The author is in essence discarded from having a voice concerning the meaning of the text.
 - Authorial Intention- this position stresses that the *author* determines meaning. It holds that the author intends to convey a specific message / meaning through his writing. The Goal then is to discern, as a reader, what was the original intent of the author.

Central Issue—Communication

- Readers have the freedom to interpret a text any way they choose. No one will force you to read the *Wizard of Oz* as a political satire. The author has control of the meaning only to the extent that the reader allows.
- Illustration (Authorial Intent)- Receive a love letter / poem from a spouse / boy-girlfriend. Your desire would be to read each line and discern / search for the exact meaning he or she intended. You would follow the AI approach because you are viewing the text as communication between the author and yourself. You will be asking the interpretive question, What does the author mean?
- Illustration (Reader Response)- You find a love poem while walking through the woods and the author is not identified. You may not care what the author meant or intended . . . and you have the freedom to interpret it however you want. Your interpretive question would change to what does this mean to me. You are free to ignore the author and his or her meaning.
- Illustration (Consciously Change Meaning)- Sometimes we change the meaning because we don't like the authors meaning.
 - John Lennon's Song- "***With a Little Help from My Friends***" (catchy lyrics and wholesome lyrics—if one interprets it literally as referring to *people* whom we call friends).
 - Historical Context- Lennon was probably using the term friends to refer to *drugs*.
 - Drugs ruin the song so we ***change the meaning*** of friends to mean people.
 - The song does not function as communication between us and Lennon—by our choice. We don't care for his philosophical input about life . . .
 - No negative consequences of changing the original meaning, and from our perspective brings about a positive change.



- **Negative Consequences from Refusing Author Intent-**
 - Illustration- **STOP** painted on octagonal signs at street intersections
 - Reader Response Approach- interpret the text to mean--- slow down just a bit, look for cars, and then speed on through the intersection.
 - Police use Authorial Intent Approach- The sign / letters mean to come to a complete halt (no movement of the car's tires) and their response to your RR approach will be to issue a ticket.
 - Ignoring the author's intent can bring about serious consequences

- Communication lies at the heart of interpreting a text. If you see the text as communication between the author and yourself then you will choose an AI approach or if you do not care about the communication with the author you are free to follow a RR approach (ignore the authors intent).

- Biblical Interpretation—Serious Decision- Choosing an **AI** approach is a foundational decision to interpreting Scripture—hearing from God, the author.
 - If you do not read the Bible as communicating with God then you can use the RR approach. Your interpretive question would be: What does this text mean to me? It can ultimately mean what ever you want. The Bible is simply good literature / moral guidelines or suggestions etc.
 - If you believe the Bible is God's revelation / communication to you then you would approach the Scripture from an AI perspective—searching for the meaning that God, the author, intended. Interpretive question- What is the meaning God intended in this text?

- **The Bible is God's Revelation to Us.** God's purpose is to communicate with us about Himself and His will for us. Ignoring His message and interpreting His Word based on feelings or personal desires will result in consequences stemming from disobedience. We will miss out on God's blessings and purpose for our lives.

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” 2 Tim. 3:16-17

“He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to Him.” John 14:21

- **Essential to Biblical Interpretation is following the Authorial Intention Approach!**
 - Key Interpretation Principle- We do not create meaning. Rather, we seek to discover the meaning that has been placed there by the author.

- **Definitions**

- Author = refers to the person who wrote the literature
- Biblical Author = both human and divine—ultimately the meaning God intended. God chose to work through human authors to deliver his message to us.
- Meaning = that which the author wishes to convey with his signs (grammar, syntax, word meanings . . .) Biblical meaning is what the author intended to communicate when he wrote the text. Meaning is tied to the text and intent of the author, not to the reader—therefore the meaning of the text is the same for all Christians! Meaning is not subjective and does not change from reader to reader! Meaning is something we can validate.

Inappropriate Meaning Question- What does this passage mean to you?

Correct Meaning Question- What does this passage mean?

- Application- the response of the reader to the meaning of the text. Right question to ask, How should you apply this meaning to your life? Application reflects the impact of the text on the reader's life—it may and will vary from Christian to Christian (unlike meaning).

- **Determining What the Author Meant**

- Meaning is tied to Context! Meaning cannot be solely determined by grammar and dictionary definitions.
- Meaning is tied to the one who produced the signs and to the context in which he produced them.
 - Illustration- a five year old boy's interpretation of what is under the hood of a car. Yes an engine, but what it means to him is something big, noisy, and mysterious versus a mechanic's interpretation of a 350-cubic-inch, V-8, 4 barrel carburetor Chevrolet engine with turbo-chargers.
- Limitations of language are a reality. Both the author and reader must work hard at overcoming limitations in the communication and interpretation process. Ex.- feelings are hard to convey accurately.
- Careful reading, context, historical background, word studies, translations, and genre all play an important role in helping discern the intended meaning of the author.