

Meaning, Interpretation, and Tension in Literature

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"Iraqi Head Seeks Arms." (Pinker, p. 69) Quiproquo, double entendre, pun. These are instances of finding more than one possible meaning to an event, most often a phrase. We can't read Shakespeare, or Molière, or the works of many other authors if we don't believe that something can have more than one meaning. "There is no topic in philosophy that has received more attention than meaning, in its multifarious manifestations." (Dennett, p. 401) Meaning is one of our most intimate bedfellows – it is always in our minds. In Webster's Third New International Dictionary, meaning is defined as follows;

1 meaning 1a: The thing one intends to convey by an act or esp. by language b: the thing that is conveyed or signified esp. by language: the sense in which something (as a statement) is understood 2: The thing that is meant or intended: [INTENT](#), PURPOSE, AIM, OBJECT

It is especially interesting that there is a difference between 1a and 1b in this definition, because this implies that there can be at least two meanings for a given event or utterance; what the meaner intends, and what the witness understands the meaning to be. The number of possible meanings grows when we consider that there may be many different meanings, or levels of meanings of the meaner. There could also be many

witnesses to the event, each with her own interpretation. Each of these [situations](#) is like a different context, which could reveal a new sense.

One area in which the possibility of the existence of more than one meaning or interpretation creates tension is literature. "[Intention](#), text, context, reader – what determines meaning? Now the very fact that arguments are made for all four factors shows that meaning is complex and elusive, not something once and f...

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...case, especially if we concede that certain things from which we derive meaning were created without intent or purpose. Perhaps our concept of meaning is a manifestation of our tendency to make up stories to explain things, or desire as humans to fill emptiness and to expand. We certainly don't have all the puzzle pieces yet; hopefully our understanding will evolve and expand as more information becomes available.

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