

Lord of the Meaning:
An Examination of Interpretive Theories

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By

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to give a brief examination of interpretive theories in hopes of determining how an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* could be justified given J. R. R. Tolkien's denials that it is allegorical. It takes the form of first explaining a pair of sample interpretations of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* both of which take it to be allegorical. This is followed by an explanation of five interpretive theories, separated into two schools of thought: intentionalism and anti-intentionalism. These theories will be examined in order to determine whether they could be used to justify an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

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All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.¹

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien. "Strider." In *The Lord of the Rings*, 170–170. Harper Collins, 2015.

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Introduction

The Lord of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien has frequently been interpreted as a work of allegorical fiction, despite the fact that Tolkien himself denies it. In this thesis I will be looking at two allegorical interpretations through the lens of a number of theories of interpretation to determine how these allegorical interpretations could be justified. The role of a theory of interpretation in answering this question is to give a theoretical framework which could be used to support interpretations of this kind. A complete justification of the interpretations at issue also requires that a theory of interpretation which supports them be itself justified. I will argue that as Hypothetical Intentionalism supports an allegorical interpretation and is defensible, that an allegorical interpretation is justifiable despite Tolkien's denials.

To accomplish this, I will first explain what allegory is by contrasting it with other literary properties such as themes, allusions, and symbols. This will be followed by an introduction to the allegorical interpretations that I argue best illustrate the central question of this thesis. Firstly, I consider the interpretive claim that the journey of the character Gandalf the Grey is an allegory for the death and resurrection of Christ. Secondly, I consider the claim that the work is an allegory for the horrors of war, specifically those experienced by Tolkien in the First World War.

Following this, I will introduce the two main types of theories of interpretation that I will be working with – Intentionalism and Anti-Intentionalism – and discuss several forms of each. The Intentionalist theories I will be discussing include both Extreme and Moderate Actual Intentionalism, as well as Hypothetical Intentionalism. The Anti-Intentionalist theories I will be

discussing are Conventionalism and Value-Maximization. I will then discuss whether and how these various theories of interpretation could support my chosen sample interpretations. Finally, I consider arguments for and against these theories of interpretation to determine which theory or theories is defensible. I argue that Hypothetical Intentionalism is both defensible and capable of supporting an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Chapter 1: Allegories and Back Again

In this chapter I explain the nature of allegories and give an introduction to the allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* that I will be considering. In the first section of the chapter, I will explain the nature of allegory. In the second section, I will present the interpretation of Gandalf's apparent death and reappearance as allegory for the resurrection of Christ. In the third section, I explore the interpretation of the Dead Marshes episode as allegory for Tolkien's personal experiences during the First World War.

1.1 Allegories

To answer the question of how an allegorical interpretation *The Lord of the Rings* could be justified, we must first have a firm understanding of what allegory is and what allegory is not. To say a narrative is allegorical is to say some character, event, place, time, and so on is used to convey a broad message on the real world. More precisely, the events depicted by the narrative must have some kind of structural similarity to the events they are allegorical for, such as a similar timeline of events. This provides aid in recognizing the presence of an allegory. In addition, it must be part of an allegorical work's meaning that it is about those events outside of the work, over and above mere structural similarity. Finally, a part of the meaning, or correct interpretation, of the narrative must be some point that is made about the events it is allegorical for. This might, for example, consist of a clarification, justification, evaluation, or repudiation of those events.

Consider, for example, Plato's allegory of the cave. Plato (*Republic* 15a-20a) depicts prisoners chained in a cave staring at a wall, upon which images are projected by a fire, which the prisoners believe to be the real world. When the prisoners escape, they see the figures projected onto the cave wall by the fire and are blinded by the light of the sun when they exit the cave. This blinding keeps them from first seeing the real objects that were falsely projected onto the cave, but as they become acclimatized, they can look upon the objects, and finally upon the sun which allows them to see these objects. This is structurally similar to the transition from ignorance to knowledge and part of the meaning of the text is to provide insight into this process. As a result, these passages of *The Republic* are an allegory for the journey into enlightenment through education.

Other well-known examples include George Orwell's *Animal Farm* – which is an allegory for the Soviet Revolution in Russia – and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* – which is an allegory for a morally upstanding Christian life. Allegories often use interconnected symbolic figures, such as the use of Gandalf as a symbol for Christ, which are so tightly connected that they work together to provide a meaning beyond what is explicitly described within the work. This allows an allegorical work to be interpreted as both what it is presenting itself as, in this case, a novel about wizards and orcs, but also as some form of statement about a political or spiritual truth, or both. In addition, allegory often takes on the complicated and relates it to the reader in a simpler and more understandable form. Because of this, allegory can give literary works a meaning that goes deeper than what we see on the surface.

To better understand what allegory is, however, I believe we must also explain what allegory is not. To do this I will contrast it here with other literary categories that I believe it is often confused with due to similarities between them and because they are regularly used in

tandem, such as symbols and themes. First consider a story that is symbolic of something, which is in opposition to being allegorical for something. The differences between the two have been debated for some time, often with allegory being seen as somehow inferior to symbolism. It is said that allegory is mechanical and arbitrary, where symbolism is organic and imaginative.² Symbolism is said to have a nearly infinite suggestibility of meaning, as it involves the absolute unity of a form and a meaning.³ Allegory is said to be the opposite, having an arbitrary and mechanical relationship between a representation and what it means or represents. I take this to mean that, at least traditionally, a symbol must contain within itself the essence of the thing it symbolizes whereas a representation counts as an allegory for something only as a result of an arbitrary or conventional relation between them. An example of this is the sunset as a symbol for ending, and the sunset as an allegory for the ending of a life specifically. Because of their nature, sunsets have often been used to symbolize the end of a thing, e.g., the sunset of our life, riding off into the sunset, and so forth; it is difficult within our culture to remove this connotation. As such I believe the use of a setting sun as a symbol for the concept of ending seems common and natural in our imaginations. On the other hand, a narrative about a sunset could be used as allegory for the end of a particular person's life, perhaps by relating the sun to said person. But because the sunset has no natural links to that person, it could not be a symbol for them. One implication of this is that you may have symbolism without allegory. This is because for there to be an allegory a link needs to be established between the representation and what it stands for. To liken this to

² Peter Crisp, "Allegory and Symbol - a Fundamental Opposition?" *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics* 14, no. 4 (2005): 323-38.

³ Ibid.

The Lord of the Rings, it could be said that because there is nothing within the novel which inherently represents Christ or the First World War, it does not symbolize those things. However, there are structural similarities between portions of the novel and these things, despite its being a story of wizards and orcs.

Another literary device which allegory is often used in tandem with, and can be confused with, is theme. A theme is most simply described as a unifying idea of a work. Works can have multiple themes which can be divided into major and minor categories. For example, the subject matter of *Animal Farm* is the Soviet Revolution, the major theme around this subject is corruption, and subsumed under that major theme are the minor themes of political naiveté and the power of language. A theme is commonly expressed through a thematic statement, which is a statement that is trying to impart a point of view within a story, be that a theme of fate and free will, or pride and courage. This is different from allegory, which seeks to explain these themes and express some kind of lesson to the interpreter, be that political, spiritual, or philosophical. In other words, the important difference here is that an allegory will represent something external to the story, whereas a theme will be a unifying idea within the story. Themes are an important part of the literary interpretive process. I believe that a work of literature which is meant to be allegorical will have a theme, but the theme does not create the allegory; that is to say that an allegorical tale of returning lost jewelry may have strong themes of good versus evil, but those themes are not what makes the work allegorical, as they may exist in a work devoid of any such allegory.

1.2 Gandalf as Christ

Many scholars have suggested over the decades that *The Lord of the Rings* was heavily influenced by Christian themes and have done so to varying degrees of success.⁴ This section of the chapter will focus on the interpretive dispute regarding the apparent death and reappearance of the wizard Gandalf within the text and the ways in which it may be seen as allegorical for Christ's death and resurrection. I shall do this by examining several arguments in favour of viewing Gandalf's reappearance as allegory for the resurrection of Christ, as well as evidence of Christian influences within *The Lord of the Rings*, contrasted with counterarguments to those points. The arguments in favour are based upon the importance that seems to be placed upon Christian imagery and dates within the work to show that the apparent death and reappearance of Gandalf is not just structurally similar to the Christ story but represents or is about the Christ story, as well as symbolic leaps that would be easily made by someone familiar with Western literature and the Christian canon.

Tolkien was no stranger to putting Christian imagery within his works, some of which is obvious to anyone familiar with the Christian canon, as most people in England at the time would have been. For example, the fellowship leaves Rivendell on their quest to destroy the ring on the 25th of December, and that quest is completed when the one ring is destroyed on the 25th of March, both significant dates in Christianity; some scholars have suggested that it is hard to believe this is coincidence.⁵ And at the very least, it offers grounds to consider Christian interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*. There are in fact so many allusions to Christian

⁴ Jonathan Padley and Kenneth Padley, "‘From Mirrored Truth the Likeness of the True’: J. R. R. Tolkien and Reflections of Jesus Christ in Middle-Earth," *English* 59, no. 224 (2010): 70-92.

⁵ Ibid.

iconography within the books that, in my opinion, they are unlikely to all be coincidental. In addition, throughout correspondence during his life Tolkien would often use Christian imagery to explain the roles that some characters would play within the world of *The Lord of the Rings*, at one point going so far to say of Gandalf that he “was an incarnate angel.”⁶ These statements provide further reasons to believe that Christian interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* are worth examining.

A sequence within the novel often singled out as supporting a Christian interpretation is the reappearance of Gandalf the Grey in the guise of the new and more powerful Gandalf the White. This is a pivotal moment in the novel, and due to the circumstances of the character’s apparent earlier demise, it has become a focus for many scholars wishing to suggest that the story has Christian meanings.⁷ This is easy to see, as Gandalf sacrificed himself in order to protect the fellowship from the repercussions of their choice to travel through the Mines of Moria, before returning as a more powerful version of himself. In this instance, it is the structural similarities between this episode in *The Lord of the Rings* and the story of the Resurrection which make the former appear allegorical for the latter. The idea is that Gandalf sacrificing himself for the fellowship to save them from the mistake of choosing to descend through Moria is structurally similar to Jesus sacrificing himself for humanity to save them from sin. As shown, there are those who support this interpretation who believe this scene could plausibly be taken as an allegory for

⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), 202.

⁷ Padley, Jonathan, and Kenneth Padley. "From Mirrored Truth the Likeness of the True: J. R. R. Tolkien and Reflections of Jesus Christ in Middle-Earth." *English* 59, no. 224 (2010): 70-92.

the Christ story based on a basic knowledge of the Christian canon and its impact on Western literature⁸. I would add that this does not necessarily mean that the scene was inspired by that particular tale, simply that readers have postulated based on the evidence within the text that it seems allegorical. However, even though the basis for this allegorical interpretation is easy to see presented within the work, Tolkien himself denied the interpretation, which makes it a good example for me to use.

As mentioned, Tolkien had seemingly mixed views on the role of Christianity within *The Lord of the Rings*, having often denied that there is any allegorical content to be found within the works, saying explicitly that the stories were written to above all to "... be readable. There is no 'allegory', moral, political, or contemporary in the work at all."⁹ However, despite this seemingly definitive claim, he would also at times draw a heightened attention to his Christian beliefs and their role within the stories, even going so far as to say in personal correspondence on the topic of *The Lord of the Rings* "... I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic."¹⁰ This has presented an interpretive dispute as we seem to have a clear statement from the author that the story is not intended to be allegorical. Yet at the same time we are presented with the thought, also from the author, that he can imagine that his readers should be able to deduce his Christian beliefs from what is presented to them in the story. This presents a question of whether a reader being able to determine the religious beliefs of a work's author in some way implies that those beliefs are themselves a part of the content of the work. It is

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 72.

¹⁰ Ibid, 72.

important to note that these beliefs being a part of the content of the work does not necessarily make the work allegorical, as a work may have Christian themes without being a Christian allegory. In my view however, by first viewing these portions of the story and their relation to Christian imagery, in concert with an examination of Tolkien's statements on the issue, we will find an answer to this thesis's guiding question of which if any interpretive theory is capable of supporting an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The scenes in question, which I will for ease refer to as "Gandalf's Fall" and "Gandalf's Return," take place within the first and second books of the novel, respectively. Gandalf's apparent death occurs during the fellowship's travels through the mines of Moria on their quest to destroy the One Ring. This mine is important as the dwarves who founded it could be said to have given in to the Christian sin of greed by proponents of the Christian allegory interpretation. These proponents suggest that the dwarves dove too deep into the earth, and in doing so have unleashed a terrible monster known as a Balrog. This is a monster whose description as a great flaming beast using a whip is similar to Christian imagery of the devil. The fellowship encounters this beast, and in the ensuing battle and chase, Gandalf sacrifices himself to keep the fellowship safe by destroying the Balrog.¹¹ The basis of the interpretation that I will be working with suggests that this sacrifice on Gandalf's part is akin to him acting as Jesus did, sacrificing himself for the sins of others. As stated, it has been suggested by some such as Jane Chance that the sin in this instance is that of lust, though not with its usual sexual connotations; rather the Dwarves who

¹¹J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994).

lusted for wealth dove too deeply into the earth, releasing the Balrog.¹² The sacrifice of Gandalf to slay this embodiment of sin, and his subsequent reappearance as Gandalf the White has been suggested by Chance to represent the transfiguration of Jesus.¹³ This is, however, only one instance of many in which it is suggested that Gandalf is in some way Christ-like, but it is an easy to understand, if perhaps simplistic interpretation when viewed at surface level. However, it remains to be seen how such an allegorical interpretation could be justified when Tolkien himself strongly denied his novel was allegorical.

So, it seems that we are presented with an interpretive dispute. On the one hand, we have a story that has been explicitly stated to not be allegorical by its author; on the other hand, the story contains Christian imagery and includes an episode that is structurally similar to the death and resurrection of Christ, and the author would himself use Christian terms, such as describing Gandalf and his fellow wizard Istari as a kind of angel, to convey his work to others. This creates a tangled mess of conflicting evidence presented to the reader regarding the question of whether *The Lord of the Rings* should be considered allegorical, and we are presented with the problem this thesis is trying to solve: how could an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* be justified? Tolkien himself clearly pondered the meaning of his story for many years, as evidenced by his many letters discussing the topic. Even his comments using Christian terminology to explain characters' roles within the story can be explained as simply an author using a relatable

¹² Jane, Chance. "The King under the Mountain". Bloom's Modern Critical Views. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase Publishing, PDF File.

¹³ Ibid.

well-known story to describe his work; it does not present evidence that he explicitly intended those things when writing, simply that they provide a convenient explanation.

Adding another layer to this interpretive dispute is that Tolkien, being well versed in literature, would not be ignorant of the ways in which his story appears to relate to Christianity.¹⁴ I also find it hard to believe the dates chosen and the appearance of the Balrog, for example, were merely coincidental, given how specifically they are mentioned and how important they appear to be in the story. Tolkien would have understood while authoring this story that it is important to distinguish between thematic content and allegorical content. For example, themes from the Bible could be seen as the nature of good and evil, redemption etc., but a theme does not an allegory make. Allegorical content requires the use of symbols and other devices to convey some kind of message or comment on the real world. So, we have a clear and obvious interpretive dispute.

1.3 Tolkien at War

Another interpretive dispute that has arisen over the years involves the interpretive hypothesis that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory for the horrors of war Tolkien personally experienced. This section of the chapter will focus on arguments for and against this interpretation by presenting several ways in which a scene, and several aspects of how it is written, have been said to be allegorical for Tolkien's experience, with a counterpoint to each. The arguments in favour of this interpretation that I will be discussing rely on Tolkien's personal

¹⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien: A Selection*, edited by. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

history, the story's similarity to other literature from the time around the First World War, and Tolkien's desire to mythologize the war.

I will not spend more time than necessary recounting Tolkien's war service, which was surely an important part of his life, to explain the basis of this interpretation. Tolkien's service began in July of 1915 after pursuing an academic deferment, despite the degree of public shame this brought him at the time. Upon entering service, he was commissioned at the rank of second lieutenant which he maintained through his departure for France in July of 1916.¹⁵ In France Tolkien found himself commanding enlistees of mostly working class whom he grew rather fond of. Tolkien's experience in the war involved service at the Battle of the Somme, participation in trench raids, defending machine gun nests, surviving gas attacks, contracting trench fever, and ultimately being sent to recuperate in England before his final discharge. It is interesting to note that Tolkien's entire battalion was wiped out shortly after his return to England. This left Tolkien in the unfortunate position, which many men of his generation found themselves in, of being the only survivor of a close-knit group of friends.¹⁶ I believe it is these last two points which primarily, though not exclusively, have led to the connection of Tolkien's war service to Frodo and Sam's crossing of the Dead Marshes, which will be addressed shortly. Taken as a whole, it becomes apparent that Tolkien's time in military service likely had a significant psychological impact on him.

¹⁵ John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-Earth* (London: HarperCollins, 2011).

¹⁶ Ibid.

The idea that his story was a personal allegory is, again, one that Tolkien himself disliked; as stated previously, he always attested that *The Lord of the Rings* was in no way allegorical.¹⁷ However, as Tolkien himself said in the introduction to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, it seems "...the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex."¹⁸ And it is hard to ignore that the soil of his experience involves being a combat veteran of the First World War, indeed he even began the collection of stories and mythologies that would later become *The Silmarillion* during his time in service.¹⁹ This is the work that would become the basis for *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and themes and symbols related to war and the horror and devastation which it can bring are plentiful within all three of the works, most notably within *The Lord of the Rings*. This kind of interpretation relies on the assumption that a person who experienced these things would likely want to write allegorically about them.

A scene which is often offered as evidence for the claim that the story is a war allegory is that in which Frodo and Sam cross the Dead Marshes with Gollum on their way to Mordor. The Dead Marshes are one of the more horrific locations described within *The Lord of the Rings*. They are the site of an ancient battle between the forces of Elves and Men and the Dark Lord Sauron's armies. Within the marshes it is possible to see the long-dead bodies of this battle below the surface of the water, preserved yet obviously corpses. These corpses are marked by flickering

¹⁷ Janet Brennan Croft, "The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore* 23, no. 4 (2002): 4.

¹⁸ Ibid, 1.

¹⁹ Hugh Crago, "Tolkien: *Maker of Middle-Earth* ed. by Catherine McIlwaine (review)," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2019): 229-31.

lights above them, which Gollum refers to as “corpse candles”, and it is said that if you become too entranced by the light to the point that you try and touch it and the bodies below, you will yourself be drowned and join them.²⁰ This portion of the work, which is obviously packed deeply with symbolism, has been suggested by some as having to do with Tolkien’s experiences during the First World War. One piece of evidence for the war-allegory interpretation is the structural similarity between the scene in which Sam falls into the water of the marshes and passages from *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* by Siegfried Sassoon and several other works from the time which describe in some detail the look of corpses in the mud, often in a similar fashion.²¹ It is suggested by supporters of this interpretation that Tolkien likely would have read these and wanted to make his own contribution to the body of war stories in his own unique way. It is indeed not hard to see how the marsh scene could be said to appear similar to other war stories. As noted above, this structural similarity serves as the minimum requirement for an allegorical interpretation, although to suggest this one would still need to discover some way to overcome Tolkien’s denials that the story was in any way allegorical. The hypothesis that Tolkien was trying to add to the canon of First World War literature is sometimes seen to support the thesis that *The Lord of the Rings* is allegorical for Tolkien’s war experience. The idea is that Tolkien was trying to mythologize the war. It is well known that one of Tolkien’s many aims with *The Lord of the Rings* was to in some way form a mythology for England and Northern Europe as a

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Croft, “The Great War,” 4.

whole, with much of the basic mythlore and languages created before his time in the service.^{22 23} It has been suggested that he began to use this mythlore as some form of coping mechanism. Indeed, he even wrote to his son Christopher that he had finally settled on the idea of a “fairy story” during the First World War as a form of “‘escapism’: or really transforming experience into another form and symbol.”²⁴ And so having a framework in place for a mythological and heroic story, it could be argued that Tolkien simply did as many writers do and adapted his personal experiences to fit within that framework and that this had an effect on the nature of the fictional world he created, Middle Earth. As at least one Tolkien scholar has put it, any plans Tolkien had for a mythology of England “did not survive the Somme unaltered, it might not have survived at all but for the advanced stage of the linguistic inventions with which it was bound up.”²⁵ Although interesting, there is no evidence in the text for this besides symbols, and perhaps, war-related themes. Once more, Tolkien has explicitly denied an allegorical interpretation. This means that any argument suggesting an allegorical interpretation will need some way to overcome these denials.

I believe this will be an interesting dispute to examine in contrast with the previous one. The dispute found in the Christian allegory interpretation seemingly relies on direct quotations from Tolkien, the obviousness of several symbols to people at the time it was written, and

²²Janet Croft, “Mythlore A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature,” *Mythlore*, accessed April 5, 2022, <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/>.

²³Croft, “The Great War,” 4.

²⁴ Ibid, 19.

²⁵ Ibid, 18.

Tolkien's own knowledge of how this would be perceived by people at the time of its writing. The war allegory interpretation, in contrast, has typically relied heavily on the idea of examining what his intentions and other psychological states must imply in regard to the scene's meaning. As discussed, however, both of these interpretations must contend with the fact that Tolkien himself denied his novel was allegorical. I believe it is possible to justify allegorical interpretations of it, however, but doing so will require appealing to a theory of interpretation which supports them.

Chapter 2: Fellowship of the Theories

In this chapter I will explain and compare both Intentionalist and Anti-Intentionalist theories of interpretation. This will be subdivided into two sections. The first of these sections will cover Intentionalism in three forms: Extreme Actual Intentionalism, Moderate Actual Intentionalism, and Hypothetical Intentionalism. And the second section will cover the forms of Anti-Intentionalism I will be considering: Conventionalism and Value-Maximization.

2.1 Theories of Interpretation

The theories I will be considering all belong to one of two categories: Intentionalism and Anti-Intentionalism. These two categories have emerged over the years as two of the main positions in the debate over how we interpret fictional works. As the names suggest, the positions are in opposition to one another. Broadly speaking, according to the Intentionalist approach, the meaning (or correct interpretation) of a work depends to varying degrees on the author's intentions, whereas according to the Anti-Intentionalist approach, authorial intent is irrelevant to meaning.²⁶

These broad approaches include several more precise theories of interpretation that differ from one another in important ways. For this thesis, the Intentionalist theories considered include

²⁶Robbie Kubala, "Literary Intentionalism," *Metaphilosophy* 50, no. 4 (2019): 503-15.

Extreme Actual Intentionalism, Moderate Actual Intentionalism, and Hypothetical Intentionalism. The Anti-Intentionalist theories considered include Conventionalism and Value Maximization. I will first introduce the general Intentionalist approach before introducing a brief taxonomy of the varieties of Intentionalism. I will then compare them with one another, followed by the same process for Anti-Intentionalism.

2.2 Introduction to Intentionalism

The first group of theories consists of several forms of Intentionalism. Although initially appearing simple and almost natural, these views quickly become more complicated than one might expect. To understand Intentionalism, it is important to first have a clear understanding of what intentions are. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be using the same basic concept used by Wimsatt and Beardsley: an intention is a design or plan the author constructs in their mind. This links intention to an author's psychological state when writing, as well as to the author's inspiration to write the work.²⁷ Intentionalism is, at its most basic, the view that it is the intentions of an author that should act as a person's guide to interpreting a work, both in the sense of a procedure for interpretation and in the sense of a criterion for correctness of an interpretation. This is an interpretive process that appears natural to a person when reading a novel or even when creating a work of their own. We assume that the author who created a work must have some degree of control over the work's meaning; after all, it came from their mind and not from figurative monkeys on typewriters. So, it makes sense to assume that the meaning of the work, to some extent at least, coincides with the author's meaning and intentions. However, this quickly

²⁷ William Kurtz Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Curtis Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (1946): 468-88.

becomes more complicated when we begin to question this assumption leading to Intentionalism being broken down into several more specific branches.

The three varieties of Intentionalism that I will be considering are Extreme Actual Intentionalism, Moderate Actual Intentionalism, and Hypothetical Intentionalism. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses which I will discuss further in subsequent sections. Extreme Actual Intentionalism claims that the actual author's intentions determine the meaning and correct interpretation of a fictional work, regardless of whether the intentions are successfully realized by the text. Moderate Actual Intentionalism claims that only realized intentions of the actual author determine the meaning and correct interpretation of a work. Finally, Hypothetical Intentionalism claims that the realized meaning-intentions of an idealized hypothetical author determine the meaning and correct interpretation of a work. It is, however, important to point out that all of these theories, except for Extreme Actual Intentionalism, require that a correct interpretation must maximally fit with the text, understood in light of linguistic and literary conventions.

2.3 Extreme Actual Intentionalism

Extreme Actual Intentionalism is the view that the author's intentions are the only determining factor of a work's meaning. The Extreme Actual Intentionalist would suggest that a work has the meaning the author intended it to have while composing it. They claim that these intentions are always authoritative, even if they deviate from the conventional linguistic meanings of the words the author writes. By linguistic convention, I mean the meanings assigned to words and sentences by conventional linguistic rules. A classic example of breaking a linguistic convention is when an author, for one reason or another, uses one word in place of another, such as Lewis Carol having Humpty Dumpty use "glory" as a term for a "knockdown argument" in his

work *Through the Looking Glass*. Despite Humpty Dumpty not having mentioned that “glory” means a “knockdown argument” he insists that it means such because he intended it to mean such, and that words mean exactly what he chooses them to mean when he uses them. An Extreme Actual Intentionalist would agree with Humpty Dumpty and interpret his words thusly, as that is what was intended by the author; therefore, the word would be properly interpreted as having its intended meaning rather than its conventional meaning.²⁸ This, in my opinion, is a fairly natural way of looking at interpretation; it gives the ultimate power of determining a work’s meaning to the work’s creator and allows for an author to break linguistic conventions for creative purposes, such as in the above example.

2.4 Moderate Actual Intentionalism

The next form of Intentionalism considered is Moderate Actual Intentionalism. As the name suggests, Moderate Actual Intentionalism is less strictly adherent to the author’s intentions than Extreme Actual Intentionalism. The Moderate Actual Intentionalist believes that meaning of a literary work depends in part on the meaning the author intends it to have, but claims that more than merely having these intentions is required. In particular, the author must conform to the constraints of literary and linguistic convention when trying to realize their intentions. Linguistic conventions are meanings assigned to words and sentences by conventional linguistic rules. For example, a common slang term such as “cool” is by linguistic convention known to mean “good.” This is different than literary convention, which refers to the way we structure our writing. For example, the indentation of a line is by literary convention taken to denote the beginning of a new

²⁸ William Irwin, “Authorial Declaration and Extreme Actual Intentionalism: Is Dumbledore Gay?” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73, no. 2 (2015): 141-47.

paragraph of text, and the inclusion of entities like orcs and wizards can be used to indicate genre, in this instance fantasy. The constraints of these conventions place a limit upon the power of the author to create a work where meaning aligns with their intentions.²⁹ What I mean by this is that for the Moderate Actual Intentionalist, an author's intentions must be consistent with the text and understood in light of literary and linguistic convention in order for the work to mean what the author intends. It is only in cases of ambiguity that authorial intent alone decides the correct meaning of a work. A Moderate Actual Intentionalist would say that an utterance should conform to these linguistic conventions if its utterer wishes for it to have its intended meaning. For example, if an author intends to write a story about an elephant, but throughout that story uses the word "tiger," the author's intentions fail to conform to linguistic conventions. As a result, despite the author intending to write about an elephant, this is not enough for the Moderate Actual Intentionalist to agree that the best interpretation of the author's work is that it is about an elephant. The author has in this instance simply failed to realize their intentions and has in fact created a work with a meaning which they did not intend, according to the Moderate Actual Intentionalist viewpoint.³⁰

Complicating this, however, is that conventions in many cases allow for utterances to have more than one meaning. Consider, for example, an author who says that a character has a "spot of dark colour upon their arm." This is vague as the spot could be taken to be a simple mole, or a cancerous growth. If the author intended the latter, but nothing else in the work counts

²⁹ Sherri Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," *Philosophy Compass* 1, no. 2 (2006): 114-28.

³⁰ Ibid.

in favour of one hypothesis or the other, this utterance would be ambiguous; as a result, the author's intentions would decide the issue, according to Moderate Actual Intentionalism. However, if there is textual evidence that the character is indeed suffering from cancer, perhaps descriptions of other cancer symptoms, it would become clearer that the character is suffering from cancer, unless it is definitely stated in the text that they are not. In this way, even without explicitly being stated in the text, it can be said that the author's meaning-intentions align with the nonconventional meaning of their utterance, in this instance that the character has cancer. In cases where the text is genuinely ambiguous, the author's intentions will determine the meaning. In both cases given here, the meaning of the work conforms to the author's intentions, though for different reasons. In the first case the intentions are not realized by the text, but as the text is ambiguous the author's intentions will determine the meaning. In the second case the author's intentions are realized within the text and hence determine meaning.³¹

2.5 Hypothetical Intentionalism

The final form of Intentionalism I will discuss is Hypothetical Intentionalism. Hypothetical Intentionalism involves the hypothesizing of an author and identifying a work's meaning with the meaning-intentions of this figure. This position is typically split between two camps, which disagree on the degree of freedom the interpreter has in the process of hypothesizing their author and attributing intentions to this figure.³² The first of these is Actual

³¹ Noël Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention and Interpretation*, edited by Gary Iseminger (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 97-131.

³² Robert Stecker and Stephen Davies, "The Hypothetical Intentionalist's Dilemma: A Reply to Levinson," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 50, no. 3 (2010): 307-12.

Author Hypothetical Intentionalism, and the second is Postulated Author Hypothetical Intentionalism.³³ These views are more similar to one another than they are different, but there are important differences between them. As a result, I believe it is important to highlight both.

According to Actual Author Hypothetical Intentionalism, in order to determine the meaning of a work, the interpreter should restrict their hypotheses to what a well-informed audience would know about the author. Levinson, for example, restricts this to things that “correspond to the public persona of the actual author; that is, to what is publicly known of the author and his works, and excluding private sources of information such as personal letters and diaries.”³⁴ Levinson argues that it is the best hypothesis that an informed and discriminating reader would have of the meaning-intentions of the actual author, so understood, that determine what the meaning of a work is.³⁵ The basic point of Actual Author Hypothetical Intentionalism could be described as to create a hypothesis which is “based on relevant, publicly available evidence, about what the real, historical person with a particular set of characteristics would most likely have meant in generating a given literary text in a particular context.”³⁶

The other form of Hypothetical Intentionalism, Postulated Author Hypothetical Intentionalism, allows a greater degree of freedom regarding the hypothesis the interpreter can form about the author as it disregards consideration their public personae. However, these hypothetical authors should be situated within the historical context of the actual author and

³³ Irvin, “Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning.”

³⁴ Stecker and Davies, “The Hypothetical Intentionalist’s Dilemma.”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Irvin, “Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning.” 123.

conform to evidence found within the text. Interpreters are allowed to attribute characteristics to this hypothetical author that would make their intentions compatible with a larger variety of interpretations than would the intentions of the actual author. This allows the interpreter to attribute meanings to the work that the actual author may not have intended but that could be reasonably assumed might be intended by someone like the author. It is through this reasonable assumption that the meaning of the work is connected to the hypothetical author's intentions.³⁷ Postulated Author Hypothetical Intentionalism is in this way less concerned with the actual historical figure of the author than with an idealized author who possesses intentions capable of making sense of all the works' features, even ones the actual author did not intend.

Both versions of Hypothetical Intentionalism are in their basic framework similar. They are aligned on the idea that meaning is not determined by an actual author's intentions; it is rather determined by the meaning-intentions competent which informed interpreters would attribute to an author who is at least to some degree hypothesized.³⁸ They are also both in agreement that this hypothesis of an author should consider several of the same things, such as the literary and linguistic conventions that the author is working within as well as some degree of background information on the author.³⁹ Similarly, they agree that the interpreter should be able to become familiar with the author's other works and should be aware of any public declarations regarding the work, and that direct statements made regarding authorial intention are not necessarily

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

decisive.⁴⁰ They also both agree that some degree of biographical information about the author should be allowed, however, both views will try to avoid things like private journals, as it is believed that comments made in a private capacity should not be used to interpret meaning of a public work.⁴¹

2.6 Comparing Intentionalist Theories

In the last several sections, I have outlined three theories of interpretation: Extreme Actual Intentionalism, Moderate Actual Intentionalism, and Hypothetical Intentionalism. These theories present us with what are in effect three levels of adherence to the actual author's intentions. These various levels present us with several similarities and differences between the theories worth highlighting.

According to Extreme Actual Intentionalism, the intentions of the author are the final word in interpretation. For the Extreme Actual Intentionalist, the meaning of a work is entirely determined by the author. Taken to the extreme, this theory grants the author the power to give their work any meaning they so choose, and indeed even any word within their work with any meaning they so choose. Moderate Actual Intentionalism avoids this implication by denying that the author's intentions wholly determine a work's meaning. This is accomplished by placing the requirement of working within known literary and linguistic conventions on the author. The Moderate Actual Intentionalist would say that the power to imbue a work with meaning is constrained by the requirement that an author conform to literary and linguistic conventions. For

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the Hypothetical Intentionalist, the meaning of a work is determined by the intentions that an informed and competent interpreter would assign to an idealized version of the author. Given that these intentions may deviate from the author's actual intentions, Hypothetical Intentionalism allows fictional works to have meanings not intended by the author.

These theories all agree that an author's intentions have some form of influence on the meaning of a work, but they differ on how much weight these intentions have in the process of determining what that meaning is. Extreme Actual Intentionalism is the most reliant on these intentions, Moderate Actual Intentionalism finds a way to temper this reliance, and finally, Hypothetical Intentionalism perhaps manages to subvert the reliance entirely. An example to illustrate this would be an utterance such as "It was a beautiful and sunny day, and we decided to meet by the bank." The first conjunct, let us suppose, is a mistake in the sense that what it means is different from what the author meant by it, and the word "bank" in the second conjunct is ambiguous between the side of a river and a financial institution. The author's meaning-intentions for this utterance, let us suppose, were that it was a dark and stormy night, and that they would meet at the bank of a river, not a financial institution. The Extreme Actual Intentionalist would say that this utterance means that it was a dark and stormy night, and that the characters decided to meet by the riverbank, as the meaning in cases both of authorial error and ambiguity is determined by authorial intent. The Moderate Actual Intentionalist would say this utterance means that it was a beautiful and sunny day, and that the characters decided to meet by the riverbank. This is because, for the Moderate Actual Intentionalist, meaning in the case of a mistake is determined by linguistic (and literary) convention, and ambiguity defers to authorial intent. The Hypothetical Intentionalist would say that the utterance means that it was a beautiful and sunny day, and that it is ambiguous whether the characters decided to meet at a financial

institution or riverbank, at least as long as there is no other evidence in the text to decide the latter issue one way or the other.

2.7 Introduction to Anti-Intentionalism

The next group of theories I will be examining, Anti-Intentionalist theories, stand in stark opposition to Intentionalism. The most basic feature of these theories is that they deny that the author's intentions play any role in determining a work's meaning, rather giving that power primarily to the text itself. Although an author's intended meaning may coincide with the meaning determined by the text alone, this is irrelevant to the work's meaning according to Anti-Intentionalists.⁴² This kind of view is associated with Beardsley and Wimsatt and their work "The Intentional Fallacy."⁴³ Consider the following statements:

The author intended x to mean p in work w

and

x means p in work w .

According to (Extreme Actual) Intentionalism, the first statement entails the second. In contrast, Wimsatt and Beardsley deny this and claim instead that an artist's intentions have no role in determining the meaning of a work. This is the view that has become known as Anti-

⁴² Alfred R. Mele and Paisley Livingston, "Intentions and Interpretations," *MLN* 107, no. 5 (1992): 931-49.

⁴³ Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy."

Intentionalism.⁴⁴ In less formal terms, it would suggest that although a given work has a meaning, what the author intended that meaning to be is inconsequential. More specifically this meaning must primarily be found within the text alone, understood in light of the linguistic and literary conventions in effect in the context of composition.⁴⁵ Linguistic conventions apply to the text of an author's writing, determining the meanings of the words and sentences that make it up. Literary conventions apply to works of fictional literature as a whole and include such things as stock characters which readers familiar with conventions governing them use to understand plot. This view, however, has several variations. I will examine two kinds of Anti-Intentionalist views: Conventionalism and Value Maximization.

The first version of Anti-Intentionalism I will be looking at in this thesis is the theory known as Conventionalism. This is a theory that concerns itself only with what the work could mean given the conventions operative in the context of composition and not with the intentions of the author or with the how valuable various interpretations make the work.⁴⁶ The Conventionalist would hold that linguistic conventions alone do the job of determining meaning, without the complications involved with discerning the intentions of an author, actual or hypothetical, or with making value judgements of various kinds.⁴⁷ In my opinion this view can be summed up as

⁴⁴ Michael Wreen, "Beardsley's Aesthetics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, Winter 2014), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/beardsley-aesthetics/>.

⁴⁵ Mele and Livingston, "Intentions and Interpretations."

⁴⁶ Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

follows: if the author wanted the text to mean something, they should have put the evidence for that within the text, as it is not the interpreter's job to discern any extra-textual meaning-intentions the author might have had.

This will be followed by a discussion of the Value-Maximization theory, which at its most basic, takes the correct (or best) interpretation of a work to be the one which will give it the most value as a work. For the Value Maximization Theorist, a work of literature should be seen in terms of what its meaning could be rather than by what the work was intended to mean.⁴⁸ This is because we should see the work as its own distinct holder of meaning, rather than as a lecture or conversation the author is having with the reader through their work.⁴⁹ To interpret the work in this way, the Value Maximization Theorist places more importance on the role that linguistic and literary convention play in the interpretation of a work, rather than upon any role that the author's intentions may have played in the creation of the work. In brief, Value Maximization is most concerned with the things that a work could mean "given the socio- historical context in which it is produced, not on the author's intended meaning," and in doing so aims at the interpretation which makes the work most valuable.⁵⁰

2.8 Conventionalism

In its most basic form, Conventionalism is the view that the only thing that determines a literary work's meaning is the text understood in terms of the literary and linguistic conventions

⁴⁸ Davies, "Authors' Intentions."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 242.

in effect in its context of composition. This theory thus holds that a work is its own carrier of meaning and things outside the text, from intentions to aesthetic value, do not contribute to the work's meaning. The only exception to this is social practices, such as literary and linguistic conventions. According to Conventionalism, the text, and linguistic and literary conventions which govern it, alone determine the work's meaning.⁵¹ I believe this is why so-called experimental fiction, which goes out of its way to break convention, can often prove hard to interpret. The reason for this, according to Beardsley, is that in the end any interpretation that someone may put forward for a work will be judged against the work, and not external factors such as authors' intentions. To further expand on that last point, there is a simple dichotomy of options when an author produces a work: an author may successfully realize their intentions, or they can fail in doing so. If they are successful in realizing their intentions within a work, that success will be clear with no need to appeal to anything beyond what is clear within the work; if they fail to do this, these intentions will not be clear within the work, and a statement of intention will not have any influence upon the work's meaning.⁵²

What this means is that external factors, such as the author's intentions or aesthetic value, are either insufficient or unnecessary sources of evidence for meaning: the text itself is all that is required.⁵³ A good example of this can be seen in the case of a novel which is interpreted in a way that deviates from the author's intentions. For instance, consider a fantasy story written with

⁵¹ Szu-Yen Lin, "Art and Interpretation," in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. James Fieser and Bradley Dowden, <https://iep.utm.edu/artinter/>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

no expressions that are conventionally used to refer to magic. It is highly likely that the readers would interpret this to mean that it is a world without magic. If the author were to say that they had intended there to be magic in the story all along but did not provide any evidence of this in the text, those intentions are of no consequence to the interpreter as they have failed to be realized in the text. This is an instance of an author's incompetence not allowing for them to express their intended meaning within the text, and as conventionalism relies solely on the text, their story is ambiguous between the magical and non-magical interpretation, at least if both interpretations are maximally supported by the text.

Conventionalism does seem to imply that more works are ambiguous than according to alternate theories. After all, appealing to linguistic and literary convention alone can often lead to several equally well supported interpretations.⁵⁴ And unlike its competitors, Conventionalism cannot appeal to external factors like authors' intentions or aesthetic value to choose between them. One upshot of this is that Conventionalism may not be able to uniquely support an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of The Rings*. Instead, it may imply that *The Lord of the Rings* is ambiguous between allegorical and non-allegorical interpretations. And if this is correct, it may be ill-suited for justifying an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

2.9 Value Maximization

The Value-Maximization theory is the view that an interpreter of a work "should favour the interpretation that makes the work best, provided that interpretation is maximally consistent with the work and respects those contextual and other features that determine the work's

⁵⁴ Ibid.

identity.”⁵⁵ To accomplish this the Value Maximizer denies that the author’s intentions have any substantial impact upon the meaning of the work and disregards them in interpretation, focusing instead on discovering the work’s merits and using that to guide their interpretation.⁵⁶ It is often said that Value-Maximization can be reduced to Hypothetical Intentionalism, but I disagree. As stated above, according to the Value Maximization view, intention is not needed to determine meaning, be that from the actual author or even a hypothetical author determined by the text – the text of the work itself, together with standards of value, is sufficient, and no extra steps of hypothesizing an author are necessary.

The Value-Maximizer believes that most interpreters begin reading with an aesthetic interest in mind, which is to say they are hoping to find some form of aesthetically rewarding experience.⁵⁷ It is, however, a point of fact that when words are uttered they may mean many different things depending on the circumstances of when they are uttered and when they are interpreted; as a result, an author’s words may be interpreted in ways that were not intended by them. Because words may be interpreted in different and at times ambiguous ways, and appeals to intention are epistemically unreliable, an author’s intentions should only be taken as a recommendation of how to interpret their work.⁵⁸ But these recommendations have no more authority over how we interpret a text than do the recommendations of other interpreters. Because

⁵⁵ Stecker and Davies, “The Hypothetical Intentionalist's Dilemma.” 307.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Stephen Davies, “The Aesthetic Relevance of Authors' and Painters' Intentions,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41, no. 1 (1982): 65-76.

⁵⁸ The epistemological availability of an author’s intentions will be addressed later in this thesis.

of this, according to the Value-Maximizer these intentions play no role in determining a work's meaning. Instead, our aesthetic interest in reading is concerned with the most aesthetically rewarding interpretation that utterances that make up a work can support.⁵⁹ This is to say that the authors' intended interpretation is not always the one that will render the work the most valuable. If both the author's intended interpretation and another interpretation which will make the work more aesthetically valuable are both maximally supported by the text – understood in light of the linguistic and literary conventions in the context of composition – the Value-Maximizer will go with the latter.

It is certainly possible for the interpretation which makes a work most valuable to coincide with the author's meaning-intentions. After all, an author typically sets out to create an aesthetically valuable work that will generate a rewarding experience; put simply, an author normally wants to produce a good story that readers will enjoy. As Davies points out, this is why we seek out books of poetry or novels and not phone books when we wish to engage with aesthetically pleasing writing.⁶⁰ And if we are being charitable, it is fair to say that most skilled authors succeed in this goal to some degree fairly often. This is why they are professional authors: "our interest in art presupposes that the most aesthetically rewarding reading of a work more often than not will be the one recommended by the author."⁶¹ However, this in no way guarantees that the intended meaning by the author will be the most aesthetically rewarding. It is

⁵⁹ Stephen Davies, "The Aesthetic Relevance of Authors' and Painters' Intentions," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41, no. 1 (1982): 65-76.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid, 66.

sometimes possible to develop two parallel interpretations which are both maximally consistent with the text, one of which is the intended interpretation of the author, and the other that renders the work more aesthetically valuable. This means that if you find an interpretation of a work that is more aesthetically rewarding than the intended meaning of the author you may disavow the intentions of the author, as long as the work adequately supports that reading.⁶² However, to be clear, the value maximizer selects amongst meanings which are supported by the text understood in terms of the linguistic and literary conventions in the context of composition.

It is also important to note, for the purposes of explaining Value Maximization, what is meant by aesthetic standards. In this thesis, to avoid the complicated issue of dealing with a complete breakdown of aesthetic standards, I am concerned chiefly with *prima facie* type examples of aesthetic standards. As such, what is meant by an aesthetically and morally superior interpretation in regards to Value Maximization is that it has some form or feature which at first glance elevates the work because of that interpretation. This is an important point: it is not the interpretation that Value Maximizers hold as superior, rather how that interpretation makes the work aesthetically or morally superior. If the work contains some feature that makes it superior in some way when a particular interpretation is held as correct, the Value Maximizer would suggest that this is the correct interpretation.

2.10 Anti-Intentionalism in Comparison

These two versions of Anti-Intentionalism are admittedly remarkably similar, but they are different in important ways. In my view these theories are very much like their Intentionalist

⁶² Ibid.

counterparts in that they seem to be separated by their level of adherence to their guiding assumption: it is not authorial intention which determines a work's meaning, but rather the text is understood in terms of literary and linguistic convention. According to both versions of Anti-Intentionalism, while interpreting a text, conventional meanings, rather than idiosyncratic meanings intended by the author, should be deployed. As a result, a competent interpreter should have a degree of knowledge regarding conventional uses of things like punctuation, paragraphs, and sentences, as well as general literary tropes of the work's genre that were in effect in the context of composition.

Unlike Conventionalism, Value Maximization attempts to decide between interpretations of the work that are equally well supported by the text, understood in terms of these conventions. The Value-Maximizer, in instances where the text is ambiguous, will claim that the interpretation that makes the work more valuable is correct. Linguistic and literary conventions are used to understand the text in the same way as they are according to Conventionalism. However, in cases of ambiguity Value Maximizers will use value as a tie breaker to determine the meaning of the work. What this means is that if two interpretations are maximally supported by the text and one makes the work more valuable, then that interpretation is correct. To be clear, however, only interpretations that are maximally compatible with the text are subjected to this test of value.

According to Conventionalism, however, it is the text alone, understood in light of linguistic and literary convention, that determines a work's meaning; if an interpretation is not supported by the text, it is incorrect. As a result, there should be no need to appeal to anything outside of the text other than the literary and linguistic conventions of the context of composition as evidence of meaning. Again, very broadly speaking this is the view that the meaning of a work must be supported within the text of that work, and nowhere else.

Chapter 3: The Two Interpretations

The goal of this chapter is to consider the implications of each of these theories on my guiding question as to how an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* could be justified. To do this, I will examine both interpretations – Gandalf as Christ, and the Dead Marshes as the trenches of WW1 – through the lens of each theory in turn. I will begin with the Intentionalist theories: Extreme Actual Intentionalism, Moderate Actual Intentionalism, and Hypothetical Intentionalism. After this will be a discussion of the Anti-Intentionalist Theories – Value Maximization and Conventionalism – and their implications regarding the examples. I believe this will give the reader a firm and solid grasp of each of the theory’s implications regarding this question of how an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* could be justified.

3.1 Intentionalist Theories: Implications

The three Intentionalist theories all have different implications in relation to the question of how an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* could be justified, specifically the Gandalf as Christ allegory and the Dead Marshes as WWI allegory.^{63 64} Some of these implications are quite clear, while others are considerably more uncertain. In my opinion the implications of these theories, much like the theories themselves, are rooted in the level of

⁶³ Padley and Padley, ““From Mirrored Truth.””

⁶⁴ Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*.

adherence to the author's intentions they require, and the limits they place on when a work of fiction expresses those intentions. As we will see, these factors have a strong influence on which of these theories are able to justify an allegorical interpretation of the work.

The implications of Extreme Actual Intentionalism are easy to deduce, as it has been categorically stated by Tolkien that he had no intention of making any part of these stories allegorical.⁶⁵ These statements made by Tolkien after the act of writing serve as a strong, but ultimately defeasible, piece of evidence in regard to Tolkien's intentions at the time; after all, opinions and memories are often far more malleable than we give them credit. Assuming that these statements may be taken as true, however, any Extreme Actual Intentionalist interpretation will have difficulties interpreting the story as allegorical, as this branch of intentionalism is defined by its strict adherence to the intentions of the author.⁶⁶ According to Extreme Actual Intentionalism, in order for the Gandalf-as-Christ allegory interpretation to be correct, Tolkien must have intended this allegorical meaning while composing *The Lord of the Rings*; even if one disregards Tolkien's denial that the story is in any way allegorical, there is little proof for his intentions in this regard save that Tolkien was himself a Catholic.⁶⁷ The Tolkien-at-War allegory interpretation similarly relies upon the idea that Tolkien intended the story to be allegorical for his experiences in the first world war while he was composing it. Disregarding Tolkien's denial, there is perhaps more evidence for him having allegorical intentions while writing the story, as there does seem to be parallels to both the events in Tolkien's life, and to other works which are

⁶⁵ Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (2000).

⁶⁶ Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy."

⁶⁷ Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (2000).

in some way related to the first world war.⁶⁸ But these parallels provide relatively weak evidence for such intentions, even in the absence of his denials. As a result, given these denials, one simply cannot take the story to be allegorical with the Extreme Actual Intentionalist view. After all, the story has been clearly stated not to be allegorical by the author after writing the story, and these statements are the best evidence we have for the intentions he had while writing it. As such, Extreme Actual Intentionalism would clearly be unable to support an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Whether or not the Moderate Actual Intentionalist view could be used to justify allegorical interpretations is perhaps not as obvious. Tolkien stated clearly that the story was not intended to be allegorical, which is important for the Moderate Actual Intentionalist as they do place importance upon the author's intentions.⁶⁹ But by rejecting a strict adherence to the author's intentions, the Moderate Actual Intentionalist may have an easier time justifying allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*. This is because Moderate Actual Intentionalism, in the first order, relies on the text alone, understood in terms of the literary and linguistic conventions of the context of composition to justify interpretations. It is only in cases where the text, so understood, is ambiguous in the sense that it maximally supports multiple interpretations that Moderate Actual Intentionalism advocates deference to authors' intentions⁷⁰. This is to say that according to Moderate Actual Intentionalism, an author's intentions may serve as a tie breaker in cases where a work's meaning is ambiguous. This seems to suggest that, according to Moderate

⁶⁸ Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*.

⁶⁹ Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning."

⁷⁰ Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning."

Actual Intentionalism, an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* could be justified only if it was unambiguously supported by the text alone, understood in light of the literary and linguistic convention of the day. But it is my opinion, however, that the text alone is unlikely to unambiguously maximally support an allegorical interpretation, which leaves the work at most ambiguous. And if the story is ambiguous, the deciding factor, according to Moderate Actual Intentionalism, would have to be Tolkien's intentions. As the best evidence supports the view that he did not intend the story to be allegorical, I do not believe that Moderate Actual Intentionalism could be used to justify an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Of all the Intentionalist theories, the one that has the best chance of supporting allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* is Hypothetical Intentionalism. The reason for this is that Hypothetical Intentionalism identifies the correct interpretation with the intentions of an idealized hypothetical author rather than the actual author.⁷¹ By using this hypothetical author, in concert with the text understood in light of literary and linguistic convention, the interpreter is able to produce a broader range of possible meanings for the work than would be available to the Extreme Actual Intentionalist. These possibilities are limited chiefly by what could be considered a reasonable assumption of the hypothetical author's intentions.⁷² Rather than relying on the intentions of the actual author, according to Hypothetical Intentionalism, interpreters are to create an idealized author figure whose meaning-intentions conform to what could be reasonable attributed to someone from the actual author's community who produced the text in question.⁷³ In

⁷¹ Stecker and Davies, "The Hypothetical Intentionalist's Dilemma."

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

the case at hand, the hypothetical author would be a hypothetical member of Tolkien's community at the time, with similar experiences to Tolkien himself.

This allows the Hypothetical Intentionalist to move their interpretations away from a basis in either a biographical or psychological analysis of the actual author, and to distance themselves from the author's actual intentions. In order to justify allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*, an interpreter would have to make the case that it is reasonable to attribute allegorical intentions to a member of Tolkien's community, with a similar background and experiences, who produced the text, whether or not it is reasonable to attribute such intentions to Tolkien himself. In particular, one would have to make the case that a member of Tolkien's community who was roughly the same age as Tolkien, was Catholic, and had similar war experiences could be reasonably thought to have intended *The Lord of the Rings* to be allegorical. It is important to note that Tolkien's actual intentions play no role in this determination. It is instead the intentions we could reasonably attribute to our hypothetical author, who is a member of Tolkien's generation, religious community, and had the same general experience with war, that we are concerned with. In relation to my sample interpretations, Hypothetical Intentionalism supports interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* as allegorical. This is because the hypothetical author has traits which make it reasonable to attribute allegorical intentions to them, which would justify allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* with the Hypothetical Intentionalist view. We can do this because, unlike Tolkien himself, the hypothetical author makes no statements of denial in regard to allegorical intentions. Instead, the Hypothetical Intentionalist would focus on what meaning-intentions a hypothetical author living at the time, and with similar experiences, who produced the text in question would have most likely had.

3.2 Anti-Intentionalist Theories: Implications

The Anti-Intentionalist theories under consideration have their own implications regarding their ability to support allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*. The Anti-Intentionalist theories are defined by their level of reliance on the text, understood in terms of literary and linguistic convention, and the limits the text so understood places upon the ability of authors to successfully express their desired intentions. These limitations are more rooted in how the text itself is best interpreted, rather than what it was intended to mean. This limitation of prioritizing the text (understood in light of literary and linguistic convention) which Anti-Intentionalist theories endorse has implications upon both the answer to the question of *The Lord of the Rings*' possible allegorical nature, as well as how this answer will be found. To put it plainly, they may be able to support an allegorical reading in the cases of my chosen samples, but only under specific conditions. This is because Conventionalism may deliver such an abundance of interpretations, all maximally supported by the text, that may make it impossible to definitively support any single interpretation. And, as I shall argue below, even if Value Maximization justifies allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*, the fact that it does may turn out to be accessible only to experts in aesthetic value.

Conventionalism roots interpretation in the text alone, understood in terms of literary and linguistic conventions, to a stricter degree than other Anti-Intentionalist theories. Conventionalism holds that it is simply the literary and linguistic conventions in effect within the context of a work's composition – which, in the case of *Lord of the Rings*, is England from the 1930s through 1950s – which determine the meaning of a work.⁷⁴ The implications of this are that it is possible an author may fail to deliver a work with their intended meaning; after all, what the

⁷⁴ Stock, *Only Imagine*.

text means need not conform to what the author intended to convey. However, this does not imply that no meaning at all may be found. If an author produces a text that fails to express their intended meaning, they may inadvertently create a work with another meaning.⁷⁵ If another meaning is maximally supported by the text, when read in light of the literary and linguistic conventions of the context of composition, this may be taken to be the correct meaning, even though it deviates from the author's intentions. The implication of this is that it may be difficult to argue for or against allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* while working within the theory of Conventionalism. This is because the text alone, understood in terms of linguistic and literary convention, may result in ambiguous conclusions on whether *The Lord of the Rings* is allegorical or not, if it turns out that both allegorical and non-allegorical interpretations are equally well supported by the text alone. This is because we cannot appeal to extratextual evidence, such as evidence of Tolkien's intentions, to choose between interpretations maximally supported by the text with the Conventionalist view. In the absence of extratextual tiebreakers, we are left with only the text, understood in terms of linguistic and literary convention, to decide the issue, and the text alone may equally well support both allegorical and non-allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*. This means that for the Conventionalist, unless a close reading of the text reveals that allegorical interpretations are better supported than non-allegorical interpretations, the story will have to be understood to be ambiguous on these questions. As a result, Conventionalism can be used to support the allegorical interpretations in question only under very specific conditions.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

The second of these two theories, Value Maximization, has its own set of implications rooted in its basic structure. Value Maximization is in practice similar to Hypothetical Intentionalism, as it justifies interpretations rooted to some degree on the idealizations and values of interpreters.⁷⁶ Such interpretations will be rooted in the text, understood in light of linguistic and literary conventions of the context of composition, rather than in the author's intentions.⁷⁷ According to Value Maximization, the correct (or best) interpretation is one which is maximally supported by the text and under which the work has the most aesthetic value. This is to say, when an interpretation makes a work aesthetically more valuable than the alternatives, and that interpretation is at least as well supported by the text as the alternatives, it is the correct (or best) interpretation of the work. This view allows us to disregard the author entirely when assigning meaning to a work.

An implication of this is that an argument could easily be made for the allegorical examples I am using. This is because it is not to the text alone that Value-Maximization looks to when determining a work's meaning. Rather it distinguishes between interpretations that are maximally supported by the text by appealing to whichever interpretation makes the work the most aesthetically valuable and takes this to be the correct (or best) interpretation. Insofar as an allegorical interpretation would yield an aesthetically more rewarding and deeper experience of *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is at least as well supported by the text as the non-allegorical interpretation, it counts as the better interpretation, according to Value Maximization. There is a *prima facie* case for thinking that the allegorical interpretation makes *The Lord of the Rings*

⁷⁶ Davies, "The Aesthetic Relevance."

⁷⁷ Ibid.

aesthetically better: it lifts the work from being a mere fantasy tale with little depth beyond themes of good triumphing over evil to being a work involving reflection on deeply held religious views and the perils of war. Transforming the work from a simple story about good triumphing over evil and linking it to allegorical meanings can make the story resonate with the interpreter in a more tangible way. As a result, insofar as (i) it can be established that the allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* are at least as well supported by the text as the non-allegorical interpretation, and (ii) the argument that the allegorical interpretations make the work more aesthetically valuable can be defended, it follows that these interpretations can be justified if one accepts Value Maximization.

Chapter 4: Return of the Argument

As noted above, in order to show that allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* are justifiable we need to show that (i) there are theories of interpretation which could be used to support such interpretations, and (ii) these theories are themselves defensible. In the previous chapter I considered which theories of interpretation could be used to support allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*; in this chapter I will consider which theories of interpretation are defensible. In particular, I will argue that not only can Hypothetical Intentionalism support such interpretations, but that it also withstands critical scrutiny.

4.1 Extreme Actual Intentionalism

In this section, I will argue that Extreme Actual Intentionalism is not a defensible theory of interpretation. The argument against Extreme Actual Intentionalism is relatively simple: identifying meaning with an author's meaning-intentions is epistemically risky, as decisive evidence of authorial intention is often hard to come by. Although Extreme Actual Intentionalism does have several virtues, I believe they are all outweighed by disadvantages that are inherent to the theory.

As noted above, Extreme Actual Intentionalism adheres to authorial intention so strictly that it will always defer to authorial intention regarding the meaning of a literary work: meaning, according to this view, is identified with what the author intended that meaning to be. Other meanings that may be attributed to the work which conflict with the author's intentions, regardless of their apparent plausibility to the interpreter, cannot be true according to this view.

This can be formulated as follows: “the author intended that x means p in w if and only if x means p in w.”⁷⁸ Hirsch, for example, has argued that, so long as w in this instance is a literary work, knowing what the author intended the work to mean is the same as knowing what the work’s true meaning is.⁷⁹

One advantage of Extreme Actual Intentionalism is that it removes ambiguity in cases in which the text alone, understood in light of linguistic and literary convention, supports multiple interpretations. Some fictional works are ambiguous when considering the text alone, thus allowing for incompatible interpretations all of which are equally well supported by the text. According to Extreme Actual Intentionalism, authorial intention determines which of these many equally well supported interpretations are correct. This removes ambiguities except when the author did not have an intended meaning for the work or evidence of the author’s intent is unavailable. Consider, by way of analogy, a case in which there are three people, each on a different level of a three-level home, and the one in the middle says “I am upstairs” in a manner that allows the others to hear them equally well. This utterance would only make sense to the person who uttered it, and to the person on the lowest level. Despite that, the person on the uppermost level could interpret the speaker to mean that they are upstairs only relative to the person below them on the first floor. Any other interpretation which is not based on the intentions of the utterer – such as, the speaker is above the person on the third floor – would be a product of a mistake made by the person on the third floor, namely that the comment was directed towards

⁷⁸ Wreen, “Beardsley’s Aesthetics.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.

them. This suggests that the only way to find the true meaning of the statement is to look at what the utterer meant when they made their utterance.

Despite these advantages, Extreme Actual Intentionalism quickly runs into inherent problems. In particular, it is faced with the difficulty of an epistemologically inaccessible source of meaning. This is a problem in exactly those cases in which there are equally plausible meanings supported by the text. If we must have access to the author's intentions to discern between equally supported meanings, in instances we are without those intentions, we have no way of discerning which interpretation is correct. This creates a degree of epistemic reliance on knowing the author's intentions, which is difficult to overcome. Even in situations where we have access to those intentions, they are typically conveyed to us through written works, such as Tolkien's letters. However, things such as these are open to a degree of interpretation themselves.

Moreover, we are never guaranteed access to an author's intentions. For example, the author of a work may be long dead with no record of their intentions, or simply unknown; in such instances we would be completely unable to discern the author's intentions. As a result, according to Extreme Actual Intentionalism, we would be unable to discern the work's meaning, as it is epistemically inaccessible. This would lead to every interpretation, even those not directly supported by the text, having the possibility of being correct. After all, any of them might conform to the author's intentions, but we have no way of knowing which interpretation it might be. One might reply that the text itself is a kind of utterance or verbal behaviour that provides evidence of intention, as it is the product of an intention. But I believe this is a somewhat circular argument, relying on the product of intention as the only proof of that intention. Alternately, an Extreme Actual Intentionalist could claim that, more often than not, an author's intentions coincide with conventional meaning. However, we cannot assume that authors' meaning-

intentions always coincide with conventional meanings. After all, part of the point of Extreme Actual Intentionalism is to help interpreters eliminate some of the arbitrary and extravagant ideas that we often find presented in literary interpretation today.⁸⁰

Another objection to Extreme Actual Intentionalism is that it is in opposition to one of the main points of semantic autonomy, the belief that the semantic meaning of a statement is autonomous from what the utterer intended. According to this view, what is important is not what an author means, simply what they have said. This is a view that most Intentionalists would take issue with. This is because, as Hirsch argues, if all that mattered were what the text says, then “any reading of a text would be “valid,” since any reading would correspond to what the text “says” for that reader.”⁸¹ On Hirsch’s view, however, there is very little room for a free interpretation of meaning, as for the Extreme Actual Intentionalist the words that constitute text are to be seen merely as “evidence for meaning” rather than bearers of meaning in their own right.⁸² Although the words that constitute the text have conventional linguistic meanings, they can only gain a further, more story-focused meaning when they are granted it through their intentional use by an author.⁸³

I liken this to the way seemingly meaningless words can take on great meaning amongst friends in the form of an inside joke. In instances such as these a word or combination of words easily take on a deeply personal meaning to a select few people, often in stark opposition to what

⁸⁰ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁸¹ Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 10.

⁸² Irvin, “Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning.” 124.

⁸³ Ibid.

the words seemingly mean on their own. On the one hand, if one were to apply the idea of semantic autonomy universally, we would never be able to make such jokes. This is because any word we use in a contextually specific way amongst friends would have to be understood in terms of its context-independent meaning. This is, however, not the case, and we are generally able to make jokes which presuppose a contextually understood alternate meaning. This rejection of semantic autonomy runs into difficulties in the case of the interpretation of fiction, however. The problem is that only people who know the history of an inside joke can understand the correct and intended meaning of it. This holds true for stories and their interpretation as well. If what an author's words mean is only what they meant by them when they wrote them, this leaves the meaning available only to a select few, and forever unavailable to those who are not privy to the author's intentions. This means that Extreme Actual Intentionalism implies that this interpretation can only be known by a select few.

4.2 Conventionalism

The next theory of Interpretation which I will be arguing runs into serious difficulties is Conventionalism. This is the belief that the only thing that determines a literary work's meaning is the text, understood in terms of the literary and linguistic conventions in effect in its context of composition. It rejects the idea that intention or value play a role in the interpretive process.

A central motivation for Conventionalism is what is known as "the intentional fallacy," which suggests that any appeal to the intentions of a work's author is fallacious, as the work should be able to stand for itself: bringing in things from outside of a work to justify its meaning

should not be necessary.⁸⁴ The famous example of this used by Beardsley is that of a statue, which the creator has intended to symbolize “human destiny.” However, as a person views the statue, no matter how hard they stretch their artistic and aesthetic sensibilities, they are unable to see this symbolic meaning within the statue. This raises the question, however, of whether we simply cannot see the meaning despite it being there, as the creator intended to be, or if the statue lacks features which warrant an interpretation relating to human destiny.⁸⁵ Beardsley would have us believe it is the second of these options. This is because the first would imply that anyone can make anything mean anything simply by saying that is what it means upon being questioned about their meaning, or perhaps even simply by intending it themselves. Another sculptor could just as easily copy the statue and say that it represents the spirit of Palm Beach in 1938.⁸⁶ This shows the way in which Conventionalism requires that a work must stand on its own, without appeals to outside information regarding authorial intention.

This can be applied to literature in much the same way: “Suppose someone utters a sentence, we can [then] ask two questions: (1) What does the speaker mean? (2) What does the sentence mean?”⁸⁷ Beardsley believed that these answers would typically be the same, but not always, as people can sometimes say one thing and mean another. This is because the meaning of a sentence is not determined by the personal intentions of the individual who writes it, but rather are set by “public conventions of usage that are tied up with the habit patterns in the whole

⁸⁴ Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy.”

⁸⁵ Wreen, “Beardsley's Aesthetics.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

speaking community.”⁸⁸ This is to say that the meaning of a work will be determined by the literary and linguistic conventions which govern the textual make up of the work. As a result, if an author wants their work to mean something, they must create a text in which words and sentences have that meaning. In other words, they must do the work of properly creating a text which has their intended meaning.

Despite Beardsley’s arguments, Conventionalism has one serious flaw. Conventionalism does allow for a wide range of possible interpretations; however, it is my opinion that this range of possibilities will often leave the meaning of the work ambiguous between competing interpretations of it. This is not a problem in and of itself, as an author is of course able to design a work to be ambiguous. However, Conventionalism would introduce ambiguity into far more works than would be reasonable to expect. Consider, for example, a work of genre fiction – such as a detective story or a romance – which is not reasonably taken to be a work of literature. Even if two interpretations were equally well-supported by the text – one according to which the butler did it and one according to which someone else was the culprit, for example – one might nevertheless resist taking such a work to be ambiguous. Whereas Moderate and Extreme Actual Intentionalism use authorial intention to select between competing interpretations, and Value Maximization uses a combination of aesthetic or moral value, Conventionalism bases interpretation on the text alone. This allows the reader to offer any interpretation that is supported by the text when read in light of linguistic and literary conventions.

By doing this the Conventionalist avoids the issue of needing to appeal to authorial intention in the way Intentionalists must. This means that Conventionalism can avoid the problem

⁸⁸ Ibid.

of the lack of epistemic access to authorial intention by removing the author's intentions as a determining factor in meaning. In addition, as we shall see below, Conventionalism avoids the need to determine the value of the work given its various candidate interpretations that the Value-Maximiser faces. However, with only the text, understood in terms of linguistic and literary convention, to rely upon, any interpretation assigned to the work through this theory may be inadvertent and even the opposite of what was intended; all that matters is that it is supported by the text. Moreover, with only the text to rely on, there can be many different, equally well supported interpretations, with no effective way to decide between them. In effect this means that we are left with more ambiguous works than we might have pre-theoretically supposed. In other words, we find ourselves adding ambiguity rather than removing it. Conventionalism lacks a tie breaker in instances of otherwise equally well supported interpretations and, as a result, I do not believe it is an acceptable theory of interpretation.

4.3 Moderate Actual Intentionalism

The next theory of interpretation I will discuss is Moderate Actual Intentionalism. Although not adhering to such a strict reliance on authorial intention as Extreme Actual Intentionalism, it still does to a degree and because of this Moderate Actual Intentionalism runs into some of the same problems as Extreme Actual Intentionalism. Moderate Actual Intentionalists believe that priority should be given to the text alone in the interpretation of a fictional work; however, in instances where the text equally well supports multiple interpretations, authorial intention serves as a tie breaker.

In the ordinary case, where no mistake has occurred in the use of language, authorial intention and the text, understood in light of linguistic and literary convention, support the same interpretations. As Stecker puts it: "intended meaning and utterance meaning will converge with

law-like singularity.”⁸⁹ This is to say that often an author does succeed in producing a text in which meaning conforms to their intentions. And when an author successfully communicates their intention by means of the text, the text counts as evidence of those intentions. As a result, according to Moderate Actual Intentionalism, in the ordinary case authorial intention and the text support the very same interpretations.

In other cases, however, an author may fail to realize their intentions if they fail in producing a text in which meaning conforms to those intentions. And in such cases, according to Moderate Actual Intentionalism, we must take the conventional meaning of the text to be the meaning of the work itself. As Stecker explains, “in the case of literary artworks, my claim is that they are utterances, and artwork meaning just is utterance meaning.”⁹⁰ In effect, the text, understood in light of literary and linguistic conventions, has priority in interpretation in two ways: first it plays a role in determining when an author successfully realizes their intentions, and second, it helps us assign meaning in instances where the author has failed to realize their intentions.⁹¹ In other words, the text allows us to determine meaning by coinciding with authorial intention in cases where the author has successfully realized their intentions. It also serves the function of determining meaning other than that intended should the author fail to successfully realize their intentions.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 431.

⁹⁰ Robert Stecker, “Moderate Actual Intentionalism Defended,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 4 (2006): 429-38.

⁹¹ Ibid.

The upshot of this is that, according to Moderate Actual Intentionalism, a correct interpretation of a fictional work must be supported by the text, understood in light of linguistic and literary convention. If the text is ambiguous in the sense that it equally well supports multiple interpretation, only then must an interpreter appeal to authorial intention. Although this is a natural and compelling approach to interpretation, it does, however, run into a serious difficulty. Consider, for example, an instance where the text is ambiguous in the above sense but where the interpreter has no epistemic access to the intentions of the author. In such a case, the work would have an objective meaning which readers are unable to discern. This means that, in such circumstances, Moderate Actual Intentionalism entails that many readers are unable to discern the correct meaning of a work. But in fact, readers are often able to discern the meaning of works in such cases, despite lacking epistemic access to authorial intentions. This is a failing of an interpretive theory, rendering Moderate Actual Intentionalism weaker than its competitors in an important respect.

4.4 Value Maximization

The next theory I will consider is Value Maximization. This theory avoids the difficulties that beset Conventionalism by providing grounds to distinguish between interpretations equally well supported by the text, and it avoids the difficulties that beset Actual Intentionalism by not requiring that interpreters have epistemic access to the psychological states of authors. However, as I shall argue, it runs into difficulty because it restricts access to the objective meaning of a work only to readers who are experts regarding aesthetic value. Value Maximization is different from the Intentionalist theories considered above in one very specific way: when there is more “than one possible interpretation, the Intentionalist identifies the interpretation compatible with the creator’s intention as the correct one, whereas the Value-Maximizer identifies the

interpretation that makes the work the most valuable as the correct one.”⁹² This is to say that the role played by authorial intention on the Actual Intentionalist approach is, according to Value Maximization, played instead by aesthetic (and perhaps moral) value.

Like the other views that have been considered, save for Extreme Actual Intentionalism, textual evidence provides the primary support for interpretations. Also, as with the other views that have been considered, the text must be understood in terms of the linguistic and literary conventions of the context of composition. This “requires interpreting works in light of the linguistic/symbolic and art-historical contexts of their creation.”⁹³ In effect, this means that the identity of a work is tied to the context in which it was composed. But unlike its competitors, when a number of differing interpretations are equally well supported by the text, the correct interpretation, according to Value maximization, will be the one that makes the work the most valuable.⁹⁴ An illustrative example is the 1982 science fiction film *Blade Runner*. Both interpretations according to which the protagonist Deckard is an artificial human being and interpretations according to which he is a flesh and blood human being are equally well supported by the text. As a result, the Value Maximizer would claim that the correct interpretation of the story is whichever makes the work more aesthetically (and perhaps morally) valuable. It is

⁹² Peter Alward, “Rogue or Lover: Value-Maximizing Interpretations of Withnail and I,” *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind* 12, no. 1 (2018): 39-54.

⁹³ Peter Alward, “interpretation, Intentions, and Responsibility,” *Estetika* 55, no. 2 (2018): 135-54.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

important to note that it is the value of the interpreted work we are talking about, and it is assumed that this value may vary with different interpretations.⁹⁵

A central difficulty for Value Maximization, in cases where multiple interpretations are equally well supported by the text, stems from the fact that different interpreters may disagree regarding which interpretation will render the work the most valuable due to the fact that people have different views regarding the notion of aesthetic value. One might even argue that since aesthetic judgements are typically thought of as a mere matter of taste, aesthetics is even more subjective than other value systems. As a result, Value Maximization is faced with a dilemma: either there are no objective standards of aesthetic value or there are objective standards which are accepted by only a minority of interpreters who are, perhaps, experts regarding aesthetic value. On the first horn, if aesthetic value is purely subjective, then according to Value Maximization, this instance implies that interpretive correctness is also purely subjective. But this would make interpretation a mere matter of taste and interpretive disagreement meaningless. And on the second horn, if aesthetic value is objective – perhaps corresponding to the value judgements of experts – this would mean that non-experts on aesthetic value – whose views about value differ from the experts – will find the correct interpretation difficult to access. This would result in a situation where if a properly supported interpretation can be put forward and agreed upon as making the work most valuable by expert readers, it would normally be inaccessible to the common reader who lacks said expertise. Moreover, even if the value judgements of a non-expert conform to objective norms, this would be mere happenstance which would render their

⁹⁵ Ibid.

interpretive judgements unjustified. The upshot is that on either horn of the dilemma Value Maximization runs into serious difficulties.

4.5 Hypothetical Intentionalism

Finally, I will argue that Hypothetical Intentionalism avoids the difficulties that arise for its competitors and, as a result, is preferable to them. As noted above, a Hypothetical Intentionalist interpreter would hypothesize an author who is distinct in many respects from the actual author. This hypothetical author is situated in the time the work was composed and is attributed intentions and other psychological states characteristic of members of the literary community at that time. This author is hypothesized to be an idealized version of the actual author and allows us to place idealized notions of intention upon this hypothesized author, so long as they are compatible with the text understood in light of the linguistic and literary conventions present in the context of the work's creation. This allows the Hypothetical Intentionalist to avoid the issues presented by Actual Intentionalism's adherence to authorial intention, the subjectivities faced by Value Maximization, and the widespread ambiguities faced by Conventionalism.

For present purposes, I will focus on the version proposed by Levinson, according to which the hypothesized author needs to have at least some degree of similarity to the actual author:⁹⁶

The core meaning of a literary work is given by the best hypothesis, from the position of an appropriately informed, sympathetic, and discriminating reader, of authorial intent to

⁹⁶ Stecker and Davies, "The Hypothetical Intentionalist's Dilemma."

convey such and such to an audience through the text in question. Thus, hypothetical intentionalism is a perspective on literary interpretation which takes optimal hypotheses about authorial intention, rather than actual authorial intention, to provide the key to the central meaning of literary works.⁹⁷

This may seem like a hard concept to grasp, but it is not unlike the way people approach interpretation when first coming to a book when they have little knowledge of the author. They typically know only the author's name, possibly from a small description about them on an inner cover, and if they care to check, where and when the book was published. As people continue to read, they often start filling in blanks about the author and attribute meaning-intentions to them. In doing this, interpreters often hope to arrive at a charitable understanding of what the author intended the work they created to mean.⁹⁸ Levinson notes that this keeps Hypothetical Intentionalism away from being simply about what the author "could have" intended and keeps it focused instead on things that could reasonably be attributed to the author.

What remains to be done is to show that Hypothetical Intentionalism avoids the difficulties faced by its competitors. First, it avoids the problem of ambiguous interpretations that arises for Conventionalism. According to this view, when multiple interpretations are equally well supported by the text, the interpretation that conforms to the intentions of the hypothetical author is the correct one. Second, Hypothetical Intentionalism avoids the issues faced by Actual Intentionalism of adhering in varying degrees to the actual author's intentions by allowing

⁹⁷ Jerrold Levinson, "Defending Hypothetical Intentionalism," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 50, no. 2 (2010): 139-50.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

interpreters to rely instead on the hypothetical author's intentions with our interpretation.⁹⁹

Because interpreters are able to discern the intentions of the Hypothetical Author from the text and minimal contextual information, the correct interpretation will be epistemically accessible even when little is known about the actual author. Third, Hypothetical intentionalism also avoids the problem of interpretive subjectivity that arises for Value-Maximization. Because the notion of aesthetic value does not play a role in interpretation for the Hypothetical Intentionalist, this means the problem of value subjectivity does not appear. As a result, unlike Value-Maximization, Hypothetical Intentionalism offers an account of interpretation that is available to all, not just to readers who are experts on aesthetic value.

At the end of the day, the case is made that Hypothetical Intentionalism is the best theory of interpretation. In addition, in an earlier section I argued that Hypothetical Intentionalism could be used to support an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*. From these two results it follows that allegorical interpretations of this novel can be justified *despite Tolkien's denials*.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

The guiding question of this thesis has been how one could justify an allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*. I have argued that an answer to this question is to be found by appeal to a theory of interpretation. Although there are several theories of interpretation which could be used to support an allegorical interpretation, I argue that Hypothetical Intentionalism is the best theory of interpretation and, as a result, offers the best justification for allegorical interpretations.

My argument proceeded as follows. First, I argued that an allegory occurs when it is part of the meaning of a work that certain events depicted by fictional narrative convey a message about the real world. I followed this by explaining two popular allegorical interpretations of *Lord of the Rings*: the return of Gandalf as an allegory for the resurrection of Christ, and the crossing of the Dead Marshes as allegory for Tolkien's experiences during the First World War. Having provided an explanation of these allegories I then considered several theories of interpretation.

I first considered Intentionalism, which is, roughly, the view that authorial intention will in some way play a role in determining a work's meaning. The first version of this approach, Extreme Actual Intentionalism, is the view that authorial intention is the sole determining factor of a work's meaning. The next version, Moderate Actual Intentionalism, is the view that the text, understood in light of linguistic and literary convention, plays the primary role in interpretation and authorial intention comes into play as a tiebreaker when multiple interpretations are equally

well supported by the text. The final version of Intentionalism, Hypothetical Intentionalism, suggests that the correct interpretation is determined by the intentions of an idealized hypothetical author working within the literary conventions of the time, rather than the intentions of the actual author.

I next considered Anti-Intentionalist theories which suggest that authorial intention is irrelevant to the determination of a work's meaning. The first of these, Value Maximization, is the view that a work's meaning is determined by the moral and aesthetic value of the work. The second Anti-Intentionalist theory presented was that of Conventionalism, which claims that it is the text alone, understood in light of linguistic and literary convention, which determines the meaning of a work.

Next, I considered the implications of the various theories regarding allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*. In particular, I argued that while both Hypothetical Intentionalism, Value Maximization, and possibly Conventionalism could be used to support such interpretations, the other theories of interpretation could not.

The final stage of my argument consisted of a critical evaluation of the theories of interpretation themselves. First, I presented objections to Extreme Actual and Moderate Actual Intentionalism based on my claim that they adhere too strictly to authorial intention. Second, I argued that Value Maximization and Conventionalism pose a risk of rendering meaning subjective or ambiguous, respectively. Finally, I argued that Hypothetical Intentionalism avoids the difficulties that beset the alternatives.

This led me to conclude that allegorical interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* can be justified. To put it concisely: (i) Hypothetical Intentionalism can be used to support allegorical

interpretations of this work; (ii) there are good reasons to think Hypothetical Intentionalism is the best theory of interpretation; hence, (iii) allegorical Interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* are, or can be, justified.

The general lesson here is that misunderstandings about the nature of interpretation are often the crux of debates over the meaning of fictional works, be they casual or academic. These debates are not actually debates over meaning, but rather debates over how that meaning is assigned, and I believe this thesis illustrates that.

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