Title of Paper: **Intentionality and Generic Conventions in Victorian Narrative Forms**

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Section: Conference Paper  
Date of Publication: August, 2013  
Issue: Volume 1, Number 1

Abstract:

In this paper I show how a reader's beliefs about the intentions of an author can affect something as apparently clear-cut as the identity of a fictional murderer. I also show how this issue leads to a philosophically important question about the extent to which intentionality should be taken into account when reading a text.

Keywords: Victorian fiction, Charles Dickens, Edwin Drood, Wilkie Collins, unfinished works, intentionality, Generic Conventions, Narrative, *I Say No*

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In Wilkie Collins's 1884 novel *I Say No*, there are two suspects in a murder mystery, Miles Mirabel and Mrs. Rook, but no conclusive evidence against either of them. However, one of them (Miles Mirabel) dies at the end of the book, and the other (Mrs. Rook) remains alive. (At this stage of the essay, I shall adopt the hypothesis that this extraordinary state of affairs was intentionally conceived by Collins.) If we accept the extra-textual assumption, which I shall label (1), that "A murder mystery must have a determinate solution which is accessible to the reader" then it follows that we need to look for some means of identifying the murderer other than explicit evidence in the text. (The assumption (1) is derived from experience with other, more conventional murder mysteries in which the culprit's guilt is explicitly proved to the reader; thus it is a generic convention.) As I argued in my paper “Yes and No: Problems of Closure in Collins's *I Say No*”, we can identify the murderer by observing that in Collins's other novels, the villain is always punished at the end of the book, and that this always occurs by some kind of extra-legal means. So in the case of *I Say No*, the suspect who dies is guilty. This makes *I Say No* the ultimate murder mystery in that it has no logical solution, but it does have a solution which can be regarded as philosophical from the point of view of the reader and theological from the point of view of the characters in the story. (I suppose that the book can thus be regarded as a parable about the limitations of rational reasoning.)

The argument about *I Say No* above relies strongly upon the reader's experience with other texts by Collins. Let us now explore a hypothetical question: what if the name of the author on the title page of *I Say No* had not been that of Wilkie Collins, but instead had been that of another author of mysteries who in his other books had consistently allowed his villains to go unpunished? In this case, it seems to me that we would have a different solution to the mystery: the suspect who remained alive would be the murderer. So we have an example of a novel where the solution to the central question in the book is dependent upon the identity of the author of the text.

Now let us consider another hypothetical question. What if the name of the author on the title page of *I Say No* had been that of a mystery author who displayed no *prima facie* pattern in dispensing poetic justice: that is to say, in some of his other books, his villains were punished, yet in others they were not. There are several different, and equally valid approaches. The first approach would be to renounce our assumption (1), and accept that in this case, we have a murder mystery with no solution. The second would be look hard for some kind of criterion in the other books which would enable us to distinguish between the cases in which the villains were punished and those in which they were not. However, the problem here is that there may be several equally valid criteria, and these may give conflicting results when applied to the new case. For example, the hypothetical author may be chivalrous and allow women villains to go unpunished: then from this it would follow that the woman suspect in *I Say No*, who remains alive at the end, is the murderer. However, it may also be true that the author hates married people and always kills off his married villains; and from this it would follow that the woman suspect in *I Say No* is guilty, not innocent. Thus this approach does not in general lead to a well-defined solution.

There is a third approach: we introduce a second assumption, which I shall label (2):
"The reader is concerned only with the text as it stands, not with the intentions of the author". The philosophical justification for my introduction of this assumption is the teleological one that, as I shall show later, it seems necessary to adopt it in order to get a determinate solution to the mystery as required by assumption (1).

By adopting assumption (2), we are now regarding the identity of the author as irrelevant. Thus we can no longer use any kind of argument based on the author's practice in his other novels. So in order to find a solution to the mystery, we introduce a third assumption, which I shall label (3): "The villain in a murder mystery is usually punished, either through the operation of the legal system, or by being killed off by the author through some extra-legal agency, whether murder by another character, suicide, accident, or natural causes". Note that assumption (3) is of a different logical character to the other two we have introduced: it is an empirical statement about the usual practice in mystery stories which could in principle be verified by observation, although of course in practice the checking involved would be prohibitively laborious. (For the argument below to work, we only need in excess of fifty percent of mysteries to have villains which are punished. There are of course many individual mystery stories in which the villain is not punished, but this does not affect the proposition that in the majority of cases, they are.) In contrast, assumption (2) is a purely philosophical assumption which, by its status, is not subject to empirical confirmation or refutation. Assumption (1) is an empirical observation about texts other than the one in question, which we are extrapolating to I Say No because of our philosophical desire for logical tidiness.

Now for the argument itself. Since by assumption (1) there must be a determinate solution to the mystery, and as there is no explicit textual solution, we can argue that the author has given a hint to the reader by killing off one of the suspects, in accordance with assumption (3). Thus as in the first case above (in which we were allowed to use the name of Wilkie Collins on the title page as essential information which guided us to the real author's intentions), the suspect who dies is the murderer. However, the philosophical basis for this conclusion is now less sound, as it rests on assumptions (1), (2), and (3); the original argument rested only on assumption (1), together with the author-specific observation that Collins always punishes his villains in his other novels.

I said at the beginning of the paper that I would at that stage be adopting the hypothesis that Collins intended the puzzling and bizarre effect which he achieved in I Say No: that of a murder mystery with no explicit solution; and this is what I have done in the argument above. However, while it is certainly possible that Collins intended this effect, it is also possible that he simply made a slip, albeit one that had an interesting philosophical effect when interpreted in the background of what he did in his other books.

I think that it is feasible that in I Say No Collins originally intended to write an orthodox murder mystery in which first of all the guilt of the criminal is revealed to the reader by explicit textual means, as in Collins's other books, and then the criminal is killed off by extra-legal means (in this case, natural causes), again like Collins's other criminals. However, I think that he may have altered his intentions during the writing of the book, and clumsily concluded it with the discovery that the murder victim had a motive for suicide, overlooking the fact that the discovery of a motive
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for suicide could not overrule the medical evidence that he had already mentioned in *I Say No* that suicide was a physical impossibility. Finally, I think that in his mind he may have conflated the two versions of the book -- the one with the orthodox murder mystery and the one with the apparent murder which turns out to be suicide -- and remembered that his character Mirabel was due to die as punishment for his crime in the first version but overlooked the fact that as the solution to the mystery was now intended to be suicide, there was now no longer any reason for Mirabel's death.

The theory I have just presented is speculative in the sense that I cannot prove conclusively that Collins was astonishingly careless in the way he concluded the book rather than astoundingly clever: both possibilities exist. However, in support of this theory, I have to say that I think it very unlikely that Collins should have deliberately hit upon this brilliant idea of having a murder mystery with no explicit solution and then concealed this innovative idea from the casual reader of the novel (and from many literary critics for over a century) by introducing the irrelevant suicide motive which the reader is misled into believing turns the murder into suicide.

So now let us assume for the sake of argument that my theory about the composition of *I Say No* is correct, and the effect Collins achieved in the book was the result of a slip on his part. If this is the case, as we now accept that the effect was inadvertent, we can no longer use his practice in other novels as part of our argument as we did at the beginning of this paper. So, once again, if we are to find a determinate solution to the mystery, we need to use assumptions (2) and (3), as we did in the second of our two cases of hypothetical authors.

As we do not at present have an answer to the empirical question of whether or not Collins intended the effect he achieved, it follows that for safety, in order to solve the mystery in *I Say No* we need to invoke assumptions (2) and (3). (Obviously if biographical evidence were to be discovered which conclusively ruled out my theory of a mistake, then we would be safe in arguing without these two assumptions. On the other hand, if a hitherto unknown letter from Collins were to be discovered in which he stated that the suspicious death in the novel was suicide and not murder, then we would have a case in which the author's stated intentions explicitly contradicted his text.)

I shall now apply the principles above to another, more well-known, book.

Ever since Charles Dickens’s last, unfinished, novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was published in 1870, there has been much speculation about the solution of the mystery. Because of the amount of attention that has been paid to the book over such a length of time, it now seems reasonable to assume that the text itself does not provide a definitive solution. To solve the mystery, I shall introduce another extra-textual assumption, which I shall label (4): "There are no means of assigning guilt to a fictional murderer other than (a) direct evidence of guilt embedded within the text (as is the case in the great majority of murder mysteries) and (b) in the absence of any conclusive evidence of guilt against any of the characters embedded within the text itself, the observation that one and only one of the suspects dies at the end of the book, and thus by poetic justice (our assumption (3)) in the absence of any other selection principle, this suspect must be the murderer." This assumption is derived from my experience with *I Say No*.

In *Edwin Drood*, the eponymous character disappears in circumstances which lead
to the suspicion that he has been murdered, but his body is not found. Obviously there are four possibilities: (a) he is still alive; (b) he has been killed in an accident; (c) he has committed suicide; and (d) he has been murdered.

Suppose for the sake of argument that possibility (d) is the case, i.e. he has been murdered. Now by assumption (2), we may ignore the fact that the extant text of *Edwin Drood* is only a fragment of what the author intended to write, and treat it as a complete text, with closure. (This is a very unusual way of using this assumption, and this aspect of our reasoning will be discussed later in this paper.) Thus by assumption (1), as by hypothesis we have a murder mystery, this mystery must have a determinate solution accessible to the reader. But in the fragment there is no conclusive evidence in the text against any of the characters; and none of the suspects dies, which would have allowed us to use assumption (3) to derive a solution. By assumption (4), these two methods of direct proof and poetic justice are the only ones available to us; and they are unavailing in this case. Hence there is no way of deriving a determinate solution to the postulated murder mystery. Hence by contradiction, our original hypothesis (which was that Drood was murdered) must be at fault. So the effect of the text on the reader is to lead him to the conclusion that Drood was not murdered. (To paraphrase more succinctly: there is no murderer, hence there could have been no murder.)

Thus one of (a), (b), or (c) above must hold. (More speculatively, we could go on to argue that Drood had no motive for committing suicide, and that a fatal accident to the title character would be an unlikely solution to the mystery of his disappearance. Thus this further argument leads us to conclude that it is highly plausible that Drood is still alive.)

Now let us explore two further implications of this argument in counterfactual situations. Suppose first that Dickens had written more of the book before he died, and that Drood's body had been found, with clear evidence that he had been killed deliberately, whether by himself or someone else. Then by the reasoning in our first argument about the book above, as Drood could not have been murdered, once again (a), (b) or (c) must hold. Clearly Drood is not alive, so we can eliminate (a); also the new evidence eliminates possibility (b), that of an accident. Thus in this case the only possibility we are left with is that of suicide. (This hypothetical case is of course much more elegant than that of the actual position we are left in with regard to the text.)

As a second counterfactual, suppose that Drood's body had been found with evidence that he had been murdered, but with no indication of the culprit. Then in this case we would have to renounce either assumption (1) or assumption (2): our assumptions are defaults which can be overridden when there is explicit textual evidence that contradicts them in specific cases.

Although assumption (2) is frequently used by readers and literary critics, usually subconsciously, our use of it in the main argument above is unusual in two respects. First of all, we have applied it at a higher (or meta) level to the text as a whole (specifically to the state of completeness of the text, in order to justify our step of treating an incomplete text as a complete one), rather than to any of the fictional events within the text or their direct implications for the characters in the story.

Secondly, in other cases where this assumption is applied, there are problems in
determining exactly what the author's "intention" was, and indeed what is meant by this term. For example, an author may change his mind during the composition or revision of his manuscript. (As indicated above, I think this may have happened during the composition of Collins’ *I Say No.*) Alternatively, he may regret his final decision after his last proofs have gone back to the printer. Also, an author may conceivably have one intention at a conscious level and quite another one at a subconscious level. These considerations do not apply in the case of *Edwin Drood*: there can be no doubt that Dickens intended to complete the story, and thus in using assumption (2) to override this for the purpose of our argument, we are indisputably (and not merely probably) running contrary to his intentions, and interpreting his fragment in a way in which he could not have intended it to be interpreted.

Of course, the assumptions above have many other applications. For example, one can envisage a novel in which a character kills someone in a shooting incident which is not presented directly to the reader, claims it was an accident, and is acquitted by the court of murder and of all lesser charges. Then a reader who believes a version of assumption (3) modified by having "always" substituted for "usually" (possibly because the reader has not yet encountered a counterexample to the modified version of the assumption) would reason that if the character is still alive at the end of the book, then the decision of the court was correct and the character is not a murderer. (Naturally, if the character dies, no conclusion can be drawn.)

The most important question raised by this paper is where one draws the line between (on the one hand) a reading of the text which seems intuitively convincing even though it may have exploited a slip by the author (as in the case of my argument about *I Say No*): and (on the other) a reading which is logically defensible yet seems purely an intellectual game that bears little relevance to the text (as in the case of my argument about *Edwin Drood*). It seems to me that this question of where the boundary lies within a text is one that is worthy of further exploration.

Acknowledgement

I should like to thank Professor Michael Slater for commenting upon an earlier draft of this paper.

Works Cited

(1) Collins, Wilkie "I Say No". Stroud: Alan Sutton 1995