

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art  
Prof. Funkhouser  
2/28/05  
Beardsley, "The Artist's Intention"

\*Artworks are the product of intention and deliberate activity. (Recall the Kant-Poe readings on artistic creation.) But, what relevance does this intention have after the artwork has been created?

"Two sets of problems appear when we consider the connection between the aesthetic object and the artist's intention. One set of problems concerns the role of intention in *evaluating* the object; [...] The other concerns the role of intention in *describing* and *interpreting* the object: these we shall consider here. It is the simple thesis of this section that we must distinguish between the aesthetic object and the intention in the mind of its creator." (224)

\*Looking at the artwork gives us some clue as to the artist's intention. Conversely, if we knew the artist's intention we could make some prediction about the artwork. But, of course in neither case is the connection (from artwork to intention, or *vice versa*) perfect.

"Thus, when we are concerned with the object itself, we should distinguish between internal and external evidence of its nature. Internal evidence is evidence from direct inspection of the object; external evidence is evidence from the psychological and social background of the object, from which we may infer something about the object itself." (225)

Q: What evidence should we privilege in cases of conflict?

--Beardsley comes down in favor of the internal evidence:

"If a quality can be seen in a statue *only* by someone who already believes that it was intended by the sculptor to be there, then that quality is not in the statue at all." (226)

The artist cannot make a work mean something just by saying or wanting it to.

--The problem is most acute for literature and poetry. There, we might distinguish between what the words/sentences mean, and what the author meant by them.

--For Beardsley, the public conventions trump private intentions:

"For what the sentence means depends not on the whim of the individual, and his mental vagaries, but upon public conventions of usage that are tied up with habit patterns in the whole speaking community." (227)

Q: Do you agree with Beardsley's conclusion about the Housman poem '1887'?  
"If they [critics] found irony in it, we should conclude that it is ironical, no matter what Housman says." (228)