
Literature and Fiction

Depiction, Narrative, and Truth

One Preliminary Stipulation

- ❖ We will think of fiction broadly, so that it comprises not only novels, but also films, dramas, operas, and other forms of depicting narration.
- ❖ So, we are thinking, really, of many different kinds 'works of the imagination,' the vast majority of which involve forms of story-telling or, more broadly, depiction.
- ❖ Still, as a first port of call, we will focus on fictions in novels, making frequent appeal to films as well.

Four Questions about Fiction

- ❖ Definitional questions: what is fiction, as a genre of art?
- ❖ Truth *in*: how is it that there is, as there seems to be, truth *in* fiction?
 - ❖ Fiction is, after all, made up, and so, it seems, altogether false.
- ❖ Truth *through*: how do we, as we seem to do, arrive at truth about the actual world *through* fiction?
- ❖ Metaphysical questions: what exactly are characters depicted in fictions?
 - ❖ They seem in a way both to exist and, then again, not.

Definitional Questions

- ❖ The inevitable definitional questions we shall largely bracket (is the King James Version of the Bible literature (or, more generally, fiction)? . . .science fiction? . . . Romance novels? . . . fables and fairy tales? . . .narrative cinema? . . . essays? . . .creative non-fiction?)
 - ❖ Still, we note in passing that functional approaches (appealing to the role of fiction in cultural institutions or human discourse more broadly) seem to fare better than purely linguistic approaches (appealing e.g., to the presence of literary devices or ‘semantic thickness’)
 - ❖ Further, we note, also in passing, that ‘fiction’ embraces a number of different meanings in different contexts: products of the imagination, being unreal, made-up, or, simply, false. We mean to use it in the sense in which we say, easily and uncontroversially, that *The Golden Bowl* by Henry James is a work of fiction.
 - ❖ As a rough first orientation, then, let us say that *being a fiction* is a property of certain narratives, namely those narratives that play a certain functional role, as intended by an author, or, failing that, as established in a culture, by which certain protocols of imaginative discourse are observed, and as achieved by certain recognized speech acts.

One Suggestive Thought

- ❖ Perhaps we should advert here to our earlier distinction between the prelusory and the lusory, coupled with the thought that fiction is essentially self-referential:
 - ❖ Fiction has both the prelusory goal (perhaps one among others) of depicting objects and events as having certain properties, but as subordinate to the lusory goal of making those depictions for the purpose of eliciting specifiable reflexive responses to them in the reader (or viewer).
 - ❖ So then:
 - ❖ x is work of fiction only if x depicts certain objects or events as having certain properties as a means for eliciting in a reader (or viewer) reflexive responses to the ascription of those properties to those objects or events as depicted in x .
 - ❖ This would, perhaps, serve to distinguish fictions from historical narratives or pieces of journalism in print media, and fictions from documentaries in film or radio.

Truth *in* Fiction

- ❖ Consider the following claims:
 - ❖ Michael Corleone is the son of Vito Corleone.
 - ❖ Kay Adams-Corleone is the first wife of Michael Corleone.
 - ❖ Tom Hagen is the consigliere of Vito Corleone.
 - ❖ Tom Hagen is the illegitimate nephew of Vito Corleone.
 - ❖ The Barzini crime family was inspired by the Genovese crime family.
 - ❖ The Godfather had its premiere in 1972.

So, evidently. . .

- ❖ Consider the following claims:
 - ❖ Michael Corleone is the son of Vito Corleone: True
 - ❖ Kay Adams-Corleone is the first wife of Michael Corleone: False
 - ❖ Tom Hagen is the consigliere of Vito Corleone: True
 - ❖ Tom Hagen is the illegitimate son of an friend of Vito Corleone: False
 - ❖ The Barzini crime family was inspired by the Genovese crime family: True (or allegedly so, but. . .)
 - ❖ The Godfather had its premiere in 1972: True

Inside, Inside and Outside, Outside

- ❖ Consider the following claims:
 - ❖ Michael Corleone is the son of Vito Corleone: True—Inside
 - ❖ Kay Adams-Corleone is the first wife of Michael Corleone: False—Inside
 - ❖ Tom Hagen is the consigliere of Vito Corleone: True—Inside
 - ❖ Tom Hagen is the illegitimate son of an friend of Vito Corleone: False—Inside
 - ❖ The Barzini crime family was inspired by the Genovese crime family: True (or allegedly so, but. . .)—Inside and Outside
 - ❖ The Godfather had its premiere in 1972: True—Outside

Truth Inside Fiction

- ❖ p is T in fiction F if and only if: p is explicitly stated in F
 - ❖ p is explicitly stated in F only if p is a proper part of F
- ❖ Cannot be either necessary or sufficient, however:
 - ❖ Not necessary:
 - ❖ Michael Corleone lied to his wife in the last scene of the *The Godfather*.
 - ❖ All of the characters in the *Godfather* have at least once in their lives been hungry.
 - ❖ Not sufficient:
 - ❖ Narrators are sometimes deceived and are at other times liars
 - ❖ Sophoclean irony
- ❖ The first problem is addressed at least in part by the phenomenon of conversational implicature; and perhaps we can extend this to a notion of narrational implicature—that is, the unspoken background

Death on a Freeway (B. Weatherston)

- ❖ Jack and Jill were arguing again. This was not in itself unusual, but this time they were standing in the fast lane of I-95 having their argument. This was causing traffic to back up a bit. It wasn't significantly worse than normally happened around Providence, not that you could have told that from the reactions of passing motorists. They were convinced that Jack and Jill, and not the volume of traffic, were the primary causes of the slowdown. They all forgot how bad traffic normally is along there. When Craig saw that the cause of the backup had been Jack and Jill, he took his gun out of the glovebox and shot them. People then started driving over their bodies, and while the new speed hump caused some people to slow down a bit, mostly traffic returned to its normal speed. So Craig did the right thing, because Jack and Jill should have taken their argument somewhere else where they wouldn't get in anyone's way.

Some Puzzles

- ❖ Alethic puzzle: How could that last sentence be true? If it can't why doesn't the narrator have liberty simply to make it true?
- ❖ Imaginative puzzle: If fiction is an invitation to imagine, why is it that we can imagine everything presented except the last sentence?
- ❖ Phenomenological puzzle: The last sentence *feels* odd in comparison with the remaining puzzles. Why should that be so? It's all fake.

Truth *through* Fiction

- ❖ It seems that works of fiction can induce us to come to see that certain true things are true:
 - ❖ Parables, for instance, are intended to illustrate truths, sometimes pragmatic, sometimes moral
 - ❖ Caricatures and satires are intended to expose and deflate pomposity, hypocrisy, and moral preening
 - ❖ More ambitiously, some fictions aim at enhancing moral sensitivity and at offering moral instruction

Moral Instruction

- ❖ But Dorothea remembered it to the last with the vividness with which we all remember epochs in our experience when some dear expectation dies, or some new motive is born. Today she had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr. Casaubon, and she had felt the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own.
- ❖ We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.

—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Two Aspects of this Puzzle

- ❖ Metaphysical: How do characters—fictions which do not exist concretely—*cause* anything at all?
 - ❖ It's often taken as a hallmark of abstract entities that they are causally inert.
- ❖ Epistemological: How do works of fiction transmit justification for beliefs?
 - ❖ If we think that $K = JTB$, and that justification requires the accumulation of evidence, how do fake things manage to provide real evidence?

Creatures of Fiction

- ❖ S is a creature of fiction in a fictional world w created by an author $A =_{df}$ (i) S is a bundle of properties as indicated by A ; and (ii) S is stated or implied by S to inhabit w .
- ❖ A proposition referring to S and as being ϕ is then true in w if and only if ϕ is indicated by A to be S -exemplified in w ; and
 - ❖ A proposition referring to S and as being ϕ is then *penumbraally true* in w if and only if ϕ though not indicated by A to be S -exemplified in w is: (i) presupposed by ϕ in w or (ii) probabilistically entailed by ϕ in w .