

“Truth in fiction”: a problem for truth or for fiction?

Louis Rouillé
Institut Jean Nicod
louis.rouille@ens.fr

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1 The problem

- Explain the following contrast:

(1) Hamlet is a human being. (true in Shakespeare’s play)

(2) Hamlet is a lion. (false in Shakespeare’s play)

1.1 No easy solution

- (1) and (2) seem to be of the form “S is P”.
 - “S is P” is true iff the referent of S is in the extension of P.
- But “Hamlet” is an empty term.
 - There is no referent to “Hamlet”.
 - **Note:** neo-meinongians deny this.
- Standard solutions with empty terms:
 - Paraphrasing away Hamlet *à la* Russell.
 - * (1) and (2) are both false.
 - Presupposition failure *à la* Strawson (and Frege).
 - * (1) and (2) are both truth-value-less.

Remark:

- Fictional sentences like (1) and (2) seem to have a semantic content.
 - Fictions can be translated, adapted, summed up...
 - There is a contrast between sentences like (1) and sentences like (2).
- It is controversial to identify this semantic content with standard *propositions*.

- There are no independent *facts* which make them true or false.
- The expressions “truth in fiction”, “fictional propositions” can be misleading if we think of *facts*.

1.2 On “inferential strolls”

- Neither (1), nor the denial of (2), are *explicitly* to be found in Shakespeare’s play.
- One must *infer* (1) from the explicit sentences constituting Shakespeare’s play.
 - Hamlet is the prince of Denmark.
 - Princes are human beings.
 - Therefore (1) is true.
 - Human beings are not lions.
 - Therefore (2) is true.
- *But* in some fictions, princes can be lions.
 - **ex:** Walt Disney’s *Robin Hood*.
- So the problem is about the *licensed* inferences from explicit sentences.
 - One should say “the problem of inference in fiction”.¹
 - The problem of truth in fiction in the abstract:
 - * Extract all the truths in fiction (or a substantial part of them) from the set of explicit sentences.
 - * i.e. for a given fiction, define the good inference relation.

1.3 Cooperative violation of Grice’s maxim of Quality

- At this point, one might think the kind of inference we are looking for is a kind of *conversational implicature*.
- But uttering (1) and (2) runs counter to the Maxim of Quality:
 - “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”
 - What are the “adequate evidence” for (1) and (2)?
 - * Precisely the inference we are trying to get.
 - (1) and (2) should be infelicitous.
 - * Interestingly, (1) and (2) *are* infelicitous in some contexts, e.g. in a history book.
- This violation of the Maxim of Quality is not *uncooperative*.

¹See Woods 2018 §2.3 for a critical discussion of this claim.

- Fiction is not lying.²
- On the contrary, one can see how the audience has to be *more cooperative* in a sense so that they accept talking about a nonexistent prince.
 - * “... a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing* suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith.”³

2 Two incompatible solutions in the literature

2.1 The modal account

2.1.1 The tempting modal intuition

[Woodward 2011]: (my emphasis)

The thought is that when an author creates a representational artwork, *they are projecting or indicating a fictional world*, which we subsequently explore in our imagination when we engage with their work. To be fictionally true is to be true “at” the relevant fictional world.

2.1.2 A counterfactual account of fictional sentences

Thesis: [Lewis 1978] fictional sentences like (1) and (2) are similar to counterfactual statements.

- But (1) and (2) do not resemble counterfactual statements!
- Lewis’s equivalence schemas:

(1) Hamlet is a prince.

(1a) In Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet is a prince.

(1b) If Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* were told as known fact rather than fiction, Hamlet would be a prince.

(2) Hamlet is a lion.

(2a) In Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet is a lion.

(2b) If Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* were told as known fact rather than fiction, Hamlet would be a lion.

²See Philipp Sidney 1595 *The Defence of Poesy*:

Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.

³Coleridge 1817 *Biographia Literaria*.

2.1.3 Further questions

[Woodward 2011]

Whilst this imagery is attractive, simply appealing to fictional worlds leaves important questions unanswered. To illustrate this point, consider that merely appealing to fictional worlds neither tells us what fictional worlds are nor how a work of fiction “indicates” a fictional world. Just appealing to fictional worlds doesn’t answer these substantial questions, which shows that the notion of “the world of the fiction” is opaque and explanatorily impotent. In order to explain truth-in-fiction in terms of fictional worlds, we need to know *what fictional worlds are*, and we need to know *how a fictional world gets associated with a particular fiction*.

2.2 The functional account

[Walton 1990] famously argued that (1) and (2) do not differ in their *truth-value*...

- (1) and (2) do not express complete propositions outside of the fiction.
- ... but (1) is *fictional* and (2) is not.
 - Uttering (1) corresponds as an appropriate “move” in a relevant game of make-believe.
 - A fiction is a game of make-believe whose *function* is to prescribe imagining the relevant fictional propositions.

Functional turn: [Friend 2016]

Intuitively, what is fictionally true is whatever obtains in the “world of the story”. Some philosophers take the intuition literally, spelling out fictional truth as truth at a set of possible worlds (most famously, Lewis [1983]). This approach faces numerous challenges. In particular, by contrast with possible worlds, fictional worlds are typically incomplete – leaving many features indeterminate – and often impossible [Woodward 2011]. Perhaps these worries can be addressed. However, I prefer a functional account along the lines proposed by Kendall Walton [1990], for whom what is fictionally true, or simply fictional, is what a work of fiction prescribes that the readers imagine. This analysis is silent as to whether the content to be imagined should be specified by possible worlds or in some other way, *focusing instead on the role of fictional truth in our engagement with stories*.

2.3 Why they are incompatible

- Friend suggests that the two accounts coexist and that it is a matter of theoretical preference to go for one or for the other.
- But I think the two accounts are in fact incompatible.

2.3.1 Paraphrase and no-paraphrase:

- For the modal account:
 - (1) and (1a) are equivalent.
 - * (1) and (1a) have the same semantic content, by definition.
- For the functional account:
 - (1) is an invitation to imagine and (1a) is a genuine assertion triggering beliefs.
 - * (1) and (1a) do not have the same semantic content.

2.3.2 Truth in fiction vs truth *simpliciter*

[Walton 1990] **thesis:** Fictionality is distinct from truth.

Fictionality has turned out to be analogous to truth in some ways; the relation between fictionality and imagining parallels that between truth and belief. Imagining aims at the fictional as belief aims at the true. What is true is to be believed; what is fictional is to be imagined.

[...]

What we call truth in a fictional world is not a kind of truth. The phrase “In the world of the Unicorn Tapestries,” preceding “a unicorn was captured,” does not indicate in what manner or where or in what realm it is true that a unicorn was captured, or anything of the sort. This is not true, period. “It is believed (desired, claimed, denied) that p” is used not to assert that p is true but to attribute a different property to it, to assert that this proposition is believed, or that someone desires or claims or denies it to be true. Likewise, “It is fictional that p” and its colloquial variants attribute not truth but fictionality to p.⁴

- For the modal account:
 - * The contrast between (1) and (2) is predicted to be reflected in the *truth-value* of the two statements.
- For the functionalist account:
 - * (1) and (2) do not differ in their truth-value.

Csq: According to the modal account, the problem of truth in fiction is a *problem for a general theory of truth*; according to the functionalist account, it is a *problem specific to philosophy of fiction*.

⁴*Mimesis as Make-Believe*, I.1.5. “Props and fictional truths”, pp. 41-2.

3 How do we decide what is true in fiction?

3.1 The Great Beetle Debate

Ref: [Friend 2011]

- Here is the first sentence of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*:

One morning, upon awakening from agitated dreams, Gregor Samsa found himself, in his bed, transformed into a monstrous vermin.⁵

- *Question*: What kind of insect has Gregor turned into?

Smith: Gregor has turned into a monstrous cockroach.

Nabokov: Gregor has turned into a monstrous beetle.

3.2 Nabokov’s argument

- **Fact 1**: Beetles, typically, get stuck on their back.
- **Fact 2**: Cockroaches, typically, do not get stuck on their back.
- **Fictional data**: Gregor, in the first scene, gets stuck on his back.
- **Therefore**: Gregor cannot be a cockroach, he must be a beetle.

Hidden premise: **Fact 1** and **Fact 2** are true in *the Metamorphosis*.

3.3 How to make sense of this argument?

- If Nabokov’s argument is valid, then “what is true in *the Metamorphosis*” might depend on a contingent feature of the story.
 - This is obvious for the functional account.
 - This is impossible for the modal account.
 - * What is true in *the Metamorphosis* is causally disconnected to the actual world.
 - * The modal account has to give an epistemic interpretation of the *Question*.
 - This is counter-intuitive.
- The challenge for the functional account is to account for the following gradable intuitions:
 - (3) Gregor is a human being. (not fictional)
 - (4) Gregor is an insect. (definitely fictional)
 - (5) Gregor is a beetle. (arguably fictional)

⁵Joachim Neugroschel’s translation, published in 1993. Scribner Paperback Fiction. Here is the Kafka’s original wording in German:

Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt.

References:

- Nabokov 1980 *Lectures on Literature*, vol.1.
- Friend 2011 “The great beetle debate: a study in imagining with names”.
- Friend 2016 “The real foundation of fictional worlds”.
- Lewis 1978 “Truth in fiction”, *American Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Walton 1990 *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of Representational Arts*.
- Woods 2018 *Truth in Fiction. Rethinking its Logic*
- Woodward 2011 “Truth in fiction”, *Philosophy Compass*, 6/3 2011.