



Literary Interpretation and the Identity of Fictional Characters

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Topics

- (1) Stories and Fictional Characters;
- (2) Identity Conditions for Ficta;
- (3) Desiderata;
- (4) Theories of Identity Conditions;
- (5) Acts and Factors of Literary Interpretation;
- (6) Literary Interpretation and the Identity of Ficta.

Macerata Research Unit

Epistemological, Ethical and Metaphysical Issues in Literary Interpretation of Literary Fictional Characters

- Marco BUZZONI (Philosophy of Science) → Literary Interpretation and Thought Experiments
- Jansan FAVAZZO (Metaphysics)
- Benedetta GIOVANOLA (Ethics) → Literary Interpretation, Biases and Ethical Norms of Literary Interpretation
- Francesco ORILIA (Metaphysics)
- Michele PAOLINI PAOLETTI (Metaphysics)



1. Stories and Fictional Characters (a)

A **story** is a collection of propositions endowed with some sort of narrative unity (e.g., it tells facts that happened to the same characters, that are causally interconnected, and so on).

A **fictional story** is a collection of propositions endowed with some sort of narrative unity and most of such propositions - or a relevant number of them - are false, even if they are not collected in the story in order to deceive.

Only concerned with fictional stories.

Fictional stories constitute or are included in artistic works. Different media. But mostly concerned here with literary works. Thus, with **literary fictional stories**.

1. Stories and Fictional Characters (b)

A **character** in a fictional story is someone/something that gets ascribed - or that seems to get ascribed - features (i.e., properties and relations) according to that story

→ characters need not be bona fide entities (neutral use of “entity”, not just for existents)

A **fictional character** in a fictional story (a *fictum*) is a character in that story that is not identical with any entity existing independently of any story

→ though it may correspond to - or have some looser-than-identity relation with - an existing entity (e.g., fictional London - real London)

2. Identity Conditions

(INS) necessarily (i.e., by metaphysical necessity), for any ficta x and y , fictum x is identical with fictum y **if and only if** (iff) P

P **need not** quantify over ficta; P need not entail commitment to ficta *qua* objects or, more generally, *qua* entities

OR (IS) necessarily (i.e., by metaphysical necessity), for any ficta x and y , fictum x is identical with fictum y **if** P

OR (IN) necessarily (i.e., by metaphysical necessity), for any ficta x and y , fictum x is identical with fictum y **only if** P

3. *Desiderata* (a)

- **Better** come up with some version of (**INS**) (necessary and sufficient conditions for identity)
- **True**
- As much **informative** as possible
- Immune to potential **counterexamples**
- No **circularity**
- No **regresses**
- No *ad hoc*/controversial/brute theoretical or ontological **posits**
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3. *Desiderata* (b)

Either preserve and account for the apparent truth of the following statements OR depart as little as possible from their apparent truth and adequately justify any such departure:

- (1) Holmes is Holmes (non-informative)
- (2) Holmes is not Watson (non-informative)
- (3) Dr. Jekyll is Mr. Hyde (informative, unlike (1))
- (4) The **legendary character** King Arthur is/is not (?) the same as Bernard Cornwell's King Arthur
- (5) The **real Napoleon** is/is not (?) the same as the Napoleon character in *War and Peace*
- (6) Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet* is the **same** as Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*
- (7) Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories/in *A Study in Scarlet* is the **same** as Holmes in Guy Ritchie's **movie**

3. *Desiderata* (c)

Either preserve and account for the apparent truth of the following statements OR depart as little as possible from their apparent truth and adequately justify any such departure:

(8) Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories/in *A Study in Scarlet* is not the same as **deviant Holmes** (i.e., Holmes introduced in some story by another author, intended to be identical with Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories, but with radically divergent properties - e.g., being a rapper living in Atlanta in the XX Century)

(9) Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories/in *A Study in Scarlet* is/is not (?) the same as **inadvertent Holmes** (i.e., Holmes created by another author, not intended to be identical with Holmes in Conan Doyle's stories, but with all the same or many salient properties as Conan Doyle's Holmes)

(10) Ménard's **Don Quixote** is/is not (?) the same as Cervantes' Don Quixote (since independent creations with distinct intentions, e.g., telling something as a known fact or as a fiction)

(11) **Believers'** Zeus is/is not (?) the same as atheists' Zeus (since distinct intention, i.e., referring to existing or to non-existing Zeus)

(12) Ulysses **inspired** both Dante Alighieri and James Joyce

(13) The Faust of Goethe's Faust is an **aspect** of the Faust general character itself

(14) Each member of a **fictional crowd** (which doesn't specify the features for its members) is nevertheless distinct from each other

(15) Each **fictional twin** in a pair of indiscernible fictional twins is distinct from the other

3. *Desiderata* (d)

Either preserve and account for the apparent truth of the following statements OR depart as little as possible from their apparent truth and adequately justify any such departure:

There once was a man called Bahrooh; There once was a man called Bahraah; But nobody knew if Bahraah was Bahrooh; Or if they were actually two (Everett's Bah Tale)

(16) According to the *Bah-Tale*, it's **indeterminate** whether Bahraah is identical with Bahrooh, but (outside of the story) it's not the case that it's indeterminate whether Bahraah is identical with Bahrooh

(17) According to the *Bah-Tale*, it's **indeterminate** whether Bahraah is identical with Bahrooh and, according to the *Bah-Tale*, it's either true or false that Bahraah is identical with Bahrooh, but (outside of the story) it's not the case that it's indeterminate whether Bahraah is identical with Bahrooh

(18) According to the *Bah-Tale*, it's **indeterminate** whether Bahraah is identical with Bahrooh and, according to the *Bah-Tale*, it's neither true nor false that Bahraah is identical with Bahrooh, but (outside of the story) it's not the case that it's indeterminate whether Bahraah is identical with Bahrooh

(19) According to *Dialetheialand*, Jules is **identical** with and **not identical** with Jim, but (outside of the story) it's not the case that Jules is identical with and not identical with Jim

3. *Desiderata* (e)

Either preserve and account for the apparent truth of the following statements OR depart as little as possible from their apparent truth and adequately justify any such departure:

Property/relation P **ascribed** to fictum by story iff according to the story, the fictum is P

→ need not commit us to that fictum as a *bona fide* entity, nor to its really being characterized by P, nor to its entertain with P any distinct relation distinct from characterization

(20) In an earlier version of story A, the fictum Tim is distinct from the fictum Tom, but in the final version of A, Tim and Tom **fuse** together, so as to constitute the fictum Jim

We should prevent the following: that Tim is distinct from Tom, but Tim and Tom are both identical with Jim, so that (by the transitivity of identity) it's also the case that Tim is identical with Tom

(21) In an earlier version of story B, there is only one fictum, i.e., Sam, but in the final version of B, that fictum undergoes a process of **fission** and 'splits into' two distinct ficta Sal and Sad

We should prevent the following: that Sal is distinct from Sad, but Sal and Sad are both identical with Sam, so that (by the transitivity of identity) it's also the case that Sal is identical with Sad

3. *Desiderata* (f)

Either preserve and account for the apparent truth of the following statements OR depart as little as possible from their apparent truth and adequately justify any such departure:

(22) Sherlock Holmes (i.e., the very same fictum) **could have** got ascribed by some story the property of having a friend named 'Wilson' (instead of having one named 'Watson')

(23) Sherlock Holmes (i.e., the very same fictum) **couldn't have** failed to get ascribed by any story the property of being a detective

(24) Sherlock Holmes (i.e., the very same fictum) **acquires** the ascription (by some story) of the property of having an enemy named 'Moriarty'

(25) Sherlock Holmes (i.e., the very same fictum) **can/could acquire** the ascription (by some story) of the property of moving to Birmingham

(26) Sherlock Holmes (i.e., the very same fictum) **cannot/could not acquire** the ascription (by some story) of the property of being a rapper living in Atlanta in the XX Century

4. Theories of Identity Conditions

Realism: ficta are *bona fide* entities.

Objectual realism: they are objects, i.e., entities that can have properties/relations without being had by anything else → esp. Meinongianism, Creationism

Non-objectual realism: ficta are *not* objects but other kinds of entities (e.g., properties, states of affairs, and so on)

Anti-realism: ficta are *not bona fide* entities.

→ Thus, true sentences about ficta should be accounted for by only appealing to further sorts of entities.

Survey: Paolini Paoletti (objectual realism), Orilia (non-objectual realism), Favazzo (anti-realism)

5. Acts and Factors of Legitimate Interpretation (b)

Act of interpretation:

relational fact with a triadic relation between: interpreter, fictum and further fact about the fictum

Michele interprets Holmes as a detective; Michele interprets Holmes as the paradigmatic hero of Positivism

Legitimate act of interpretation: only if compatible with all available textual and extratextual relevant **evidence** about that fictum → possibly, **many** legitimate acts of interpretation about a given fictum

Mostly, but not only concerned with:

- relations between ficta and authors;
- relations between ficta and historical/cultural contexts;
- relations between ficta and communities of interpreters;
- stylistic/literary properties of ficta.

5. Acts and Factors of Legitimate Interpretation (b)

Factor of interpretation:

something that determines (or at least contributes to determining) at least one legitimate act of interpretation → by 'creating' evidence; by making evidence relevant; by making act of interpretation legitimate in some other way; and so on

- **Text;**
- Linguistic **conventions;**
- Historical/cultural **context** of **actual** author;
- **Actual** intentions of **actual** author;
- **Hypothetical** intentions of **actual** author;
- **Hypothetical** intentions of **hypothetical** author;
 - intentions with respect to: ficta / historical/cultural context / intended audience
- **Original community** of interpreters;
- **Contemporary** community of interpreters;
- Maximization of **specific values** (e.g., artistic ones);
- Historical/cultural **context** of **interpreters**.

6. Literary Interpretation and the Identity of Ficta (a)

necessarily (i.e., by metaphysical necessity), for any ficta x and y , fictum x is identical with fictum y **if and only if** (iff) / **if** / **only if** P

- (1) Can legitimate acts of interpretation figure in P ?
- (2) Can legitimate acts of interpretation determine/cause/constrain/influence what figures in P ?
- (3) Can factors of interpretation figure in P ?
- (4) Can factors of interpretation determine/cause/constrain/influence what figures in P ?
- (5) What factors of interpretation are exclusively or mostly relevant in determining/causing/constraining/influencing what figures in P ?

6. Literary Interpretation and the Identity of Ficta (b)

necessarily (i.e., by metaphysical necessity), for any ficta x and y , fictum x is identical with fictum y **if and only if** (iff) / **if** / **only if** P

(1) Can legitimate acts of interpretation figure in P?

No → redundant (the facts about the ficta included in them are enough to figure in P) + tie the identity of ficta to existence of specific interpreting interpreters

Something analogous with (3).

Exception: if specific acts by actual authors included in the identity conditions of ficta and if actual intentions of actual authors included in the identity conditions of such acts, then by transitivity...

6. Literary Interpretation and the Identity of Ficta (c)

necessarily (i.e., by metaphysical necessity), for any ficta x and y , fictum x is identical with fictum y **if and only if** (iff) / **if** / **only if** P

(2) Can legitimate acts of interpretation determine/cause/constrain/influence what figures in P ?

Yes! They can determine/cause/constrain/influence P itself or some part thereof (**Michele interprets Holmes as the paradigmatic hero of Positivism; P = Holmes' being the paradigmatic hero of Positivism**)

→ thus, necessarily, identity conditions (P) only if some act of interpretation or another, but no specific act of interpretation included in P → controversial?

Something analogous - and even less controversial - with (4) (factors of interpretation).

6. Literary Interpretation and the Identity of Ficta (d)

necessarily (i.e., by metaphysical necessity), for any ficta x and y , fictum x is identical with fictum y **if and only if** (iff) / **if** / **only if** P

- (5) What factors of interpretation are exclusively or mostly relevant in determining/causing/constraining/influencing what figures in P?

My hypothesis: **intentional actual relations** between **actual author**, **fictum** and **intended original interpreters** (e.g. **Conan Doyle's intending to represent Holmes as the paradigmatic hero of Positivism with respect to his intended readers**)

→ they 'ground' or contribute to grounding the relevance of all the other factors of interpretation (original context, original community of interpreters, text, best hypothetical intentions, and so on)