

Fictional Characters

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Abstract

If there are no fictional characters, how do we explain thought and discourse apparently about them? If there are, what are they like? A growing number of philosophers claim that fictional characters are abstract objects akin to novels or plots. They argue that postulating characters provides the most straightforward explanation of our literary practices as well as a uniform account of discourse and thought about fiction. Anti-realists counter that postulation is neither necessary nor straightforward, and that the invocation of pretense provides a better account of the same phenomena. I outline and assess these competing theories.

Sherlock Holmes, Emma Bovary, and Mrs. Dalloway are fictional characters. If that is true, it appears that there are fictional characters (at least three). Yet fictional characters would seem not to exist. Meinong famously concluded that *there are*—in an ontologically committed sense—things that do not exist. Those who reject this paradoxical conclusion argue either that there are no fictional characters, or that they do exist—not as people, but as abstract objects akin to novels or plots. If there are no fictional characters, how do we explain thought and discourse apparently about them? If there are, what role do they play in explaining our literary practices? A growing number of philosophers claim that fictional characters are abstract objects akin to novels or plots. They argue that postulating characters provides the most straightforward explanation of our literary practices as well as a uniform account of discourse and thought about fiction. Anti-realists counter that postulation is neither necessary nor straightforward, and that the invocation of pretense provides a better account of the same phenomena.

After clarifying the terms of the debate between realists and anti-realists about fictional characters (§1), I consider anti-realist strategies (§2). Problems facing these accounts lead to arguments in favor of realism (§3), but a closer examination of the realist strategy suggests that this position does not provide a smoother account of discourse about fictional characters than anti-realist approaches (§4). Both sides of the debate face difficulties in explaining how we think and talk about particular fictional characters. In (§5) I offer a comparative assessment of the two theories.

§1. Fiction and fictional characters

I begin with a few remarks to clarify the debate about fictional characters. The application of the term ‘fictional characters’ is both wider and narrower than in ordinary usage. Rather than applying only to fictional persons (Emma Bovary, Humbert Humbert), fictional characters also include fictional places (Lilliput, the Castle), fictional things (the One Ring, the painting of Dorian Gray), and perhaps fictional events (Othello’s murdering Desdemona, Mrs. Dalloway’s party). At the same time, fictional characters are restricted to characters introduced in works of fiction. Zeus, Vulcan, and the monster under my bed are ‘mythical creatures,’ ‘failed scientific posits,’ ‘figments of my imagination,’ etc., which may

or may not be covered by arguments concerning fictional characters. I use ‘fictional characters’ in an ontologically neutral sense, reserving the term *fictitious objects* for realist posits.

Fictional characters may be described in great detail, as is Emma Woodhouse, or in very little, as are the stock characters of medieval morality plays (Everyman, Knowledge). Like Emma they may have names; like the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, they may not. They may show up in different fictions, as does Odysseus in Homer’s epics and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Indisputably real individuals who appear in fiction, such as Napoleon and London, are not fictional characters in the relevant sense. Now, there are various reasons one might deny that (say) the Napoleon of *War and Peace* is the real Napoleon. But given that it was certainly Tolstoy’s intention to write about the real Napoleon, and that there is no bar to imagining real individuals to be different from how they actually are, I assume that fictions can designate real individuals.

I do not offer a definition of fiction here; my examples include only paradigm instances of fictional texts, though the arguments extend to other kinds of fiction (e.g., movies). It would be impossible to proceed, though, without making some assumptions. I take for granted fictions are designed to prompt imaginings (they may do other things as well). Suppose I read that during a bloody battle, “Candide, trembling like a philosopher, hid himself as best he could during this heroic butchery” (Voltaire 1961, 20). I recognize that Voltaire is not asserting that this really happened; he is usefully construed as engaged in a kind of non-deceptive pretense that there is such a person who trembled and so on. In response, I am supposed to imagine—or make believe, or pretend—that Candide trembled. In this sense, fictions *prescribe* or *authorize* imaginings (Walton 1990). What with unreliable narrators, inconsistent characterizations, impossible plots, etc., it may be difficult to determine the content of a fiction or impossible to imagine it. It remains the case that the appropriate basic response to fiction is to imagine what is “fictionally true,” according to the (or a) correct interpretation of the work.

While realism about fictional characters has a growing number of adherents, anti-realism has historically been the standard philosophical position. Moreover, we ordinarily assume that fictional characters do not exist; indeed we sometimes use the term ‘fictional’ as a synonym for ‘nonexistent’ or ‘unreal.’ Yet anti-realism faces important challenges. One is explaining the intentionality of thought: what are thoughts “about Candide” about, if there is no such individual? The recent debate has focused primarily on discourse about fictional characters. If there is no Hamlet, how can some statements about him, such as “Hamlet is melancholy” or “Hamlet is a fictional character,” be true, while others, such as “Hamlet is upbeat” or “Hamlet exists,” are false?

§2. *Anti-realist strategies*

The debate over fictional discourse usually focuses on how to understand empty (non-referring) names. Most philosophers accept that names in ordinary contexts are *directly referential*: the semantic content of the name is its referent, rather than a descriptive sense. If a name lacks a referent, it has no semantic content, and sentences containing it cannot express complete propositions. It would seem, then, that those sentences can be neither true nor false (or are possibly just false: see Braun 2005). Yet while one might agree that “Candide trembled” is not true *simpliciter*, it does seem to be true when understood as implicitly prefixed by a story operator such as ‘according to the fiction’—just as we take “Amy believes that Santa Claus is coming tonight” to be true though there is no Santa Claus. But if “Candide trembled” expresses no complete proposition, neither does the prefixed claim (there is no proposition such that *it* is so according to the fiction). The same applies to “Candide is a fictional character” and “Candide does not exist.”

Adopting some form of descriptivist or quantificational analysis of characters' names (Currie 1990; Lamarque and Olsen 1994) does not resolve the problem. In addition to the implausible assumption that names in fictional contexts function differently from names in other contexts, this approach applies only to statements prefixed by 'in the story.' Consider intensional transitive constructions ("I pity Anna Karenina"), transfictional comparisons ("Sherlock Holmes is more brilliant than Hercule Poirot"), and metafictional statements ("Hamlet is a fictional character"). Unlike "Candide trembled," none of these claims can be prefixed by a story operator. In fact the most difficult claims for the anti-realist to address do not involve names at all. These are statements that seem to quantify over fictional characters, such as "There are more flat fictional characters than round ones."

Apart from true negative existential claims ("Iago does not exist"), which are problematic on every theory and which I therefore ignore here, the realist claims to offer a unified account of all these types of fictional discourse. While the anti-realist who accepts referentialism can also offer a unified account, it is one on which no statements about fictional characters are literally true (Adams et al. 1997). This conclusion, though it might be correct, is unsatisfactory. If statements apparently about Hamlet are not really about anything, if nothing we say about Hamlet is true, what is the point of talking about him? The anti-realist owes us an explanation of the function of fictional discourse.

A standard anti-realist move at this stage is to say that in discourse about fictional characters, we engage in the *pretense* that there are such individuals for various purposes. This proposal, most closely associated with the work of Kendall Walton (esp. Walton 1990), flows directly from Walton's conception of fictions as props in "games of make-believe." Suppose I read *The Portrait of a Lady*. In imagining that Isabel Archer marries Gilbert Osmond and thereby condemns herself to unhappiness; in pitying her; in exclaiming "Poor Isabel! She has ruined her life. I feel terribly sorry for her," I participate in a game in which James's novel is a prop. Within the game, there is such person as Isabel to be pitied and talked about; in reality, there is not. My statements about Isabel are thus uttered in pretense and are not literally true. Instead they constitute moves in a game of make-believe prompted by the novel, which may be appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the (usually implicit) "rules" of the game.

Walton appeals to the concept of appropriateness to explain why talking about fictional characters can also be used for serious purposes, for instance conveying information about the content of a fiction. According to Walton, in uttering "Isabel married Gilbert" I assert that speaking thusly—engaging in the kind of pretense exemplified by the utterance—is appropriate in the "official" game of make-believe authorized by James's novel (Walton 1990, 400ff). This analysis is driven, not by the need to accommodate empty names (*contra* Richard 2000), but by the view that participation in games of make-believe has explanatory priority for our discourse about fictional characters. Thus Walton offers exactly the same analysis of utterances containing referring names: in saying "Richard III had his brother Clarence murdered" (a historically false claim) one asserts that speaking thusly is appropriate in the game authorized by Shakespeare's play. In either case, because it is in virtue of facts about the interpretation of the fiction that a given kind of pretense is appropriate, one can use the pretense to convey something true about fictional content.

This proposal may be understood in two ways. On one interpretation, the pretense enters at the semantic level. So "Isabel married Gilbert" *means* (roughly) that speaking thusly is an appropriate move in a certain game of make-believe; it is genuinely, but not literally, true. This semantic interpretation of fictionalism has been widely criticized, both for fictional discourse and for other domains (see Richard 2000; Stanley 2001). On a less controversial interpretation, "Isabel marries Gilbert" means whatever one's standard semantic account says it means: perhaps an incomplete or "gappy" proposition of the form 'x married y.' If there is

no Isabel or Gilbert, the statement expresses no complete proposition and thus cannot be true. The fictionalist must then explain how such statements can be *used* to convey truths, typically by specifying the rules or “bridge laws” connecting statements uttered in pretense with real-world truth conditions (Nolan 2005; see also Richard 2000 for a critical account). I assume this pragmatic interpretation here.

An advantage of Walton’s approach over anti-realist alternatives is that the same analysis can be extended to other kinds of fictional discourse. On Walton’s view, statements such as “I feel terribly sorry for Isabel” or “Holmes is more brilliant than Poirot” convey truths about the kinds of pretense appropriate for certain “unofficial” games of make-believe, games that go beyond the authorized content of a fiction. While the facts in virtue of which these utterances count as appropriate moves (e.g., facts about my emotional state, facts about comparative interpretation) vary for different kinds of pretense, all such utterances have the same *general* real-world truth conditions. At the same time, given the bridge laws connecting kinds of pretense with relevant facts, we can convey more *specific* truths: for instance, that I experience a certain emotional state in response to James’s novel.

There are several difficulties facing the pretense approach. First, while claims about my pity of Isabel or about Holmes’s brilliance compared to Poirot’s might be construed as natural continuations of the pretense that there are such *persons*, this seems less plausible for metafictional claims like “Isabel is a fictional character,” which appear to be both serious and straightforwardly true. Walton suggests two options for dealing with the latter sort of discourse. The first is to invoke an unofficial game in which we assume that there really are such things as fictional characters, that the entities the world contains can be divided into “fictional” and “real.” The alternative is to see the explicit reference to Isabel’s fictionality as a “betrayal” of the pretense, implied by the use of the name, that there is such an individual (Walton 1990, Ch. 11). Realists are likely to treat either approach as an *ad hoc* maneuver designed to extend the pretense analysis to recalcitrant data; but as we shall see (§3), realists face similar challenges in trying to account for certain domains of discourse.

A second and more pressing concern about the pretense approach is that it is radically underspecified. How do we individuate games of make-believe? What makes it the case that a certain kind of pretense is appropriate for a particular game? And most importantly for present purposes, in virtue of what does a given kind of pretense count as about a fictional character? The challenge is to answer these questions without invoking fictitious objects.

Suppose for the sake of argument that my utterance “Isabel married Gilbert” expresses the gappy proposition ‘*x* married *y*.’ It therefore expresses the same proposition as “Romeo married Juliet” and, for that matter, “Isabel married Isabel.” Yet these statements appear to be about different things. This difference is a recurring challenge to referentialists who accept anti-realism. They must explain how to distinguish thought or discourse about one non-existent thing from thought or discourse about another, without appealing to objects. Walton’s explanation is that the uses of the names exemplify different *kinds of pretense*: the Isabel-directed kind, the Gilbert-directed kind, etc. The question is then what individuates these kinds of pretense.

Individuation cannot just be by name (type), since different characters may have the same name (‘Emma’ in Austen and Flaubert) and the same character may have different names (‘Odysseus’ and ‘Ulysses,’ at least in English). Appealing to the descriptive content associated with a character’s name (Adams et al. 1997) will fail to distinguish between characters described in the same way (‘the man in the corner’; Cervantes’ and Pierre Menard’s Don Quixotes), or will entail that there are two distinct characters whenever an apparently single character is described differently (Odysseus in *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*). Walton concludes that there is no way to specify a kind of pretense apart from pointing to instances related in certain ways to a fiction (Walton 1990, 390ff). Perhaps the

fact that some uses of ‘Emma’ are related to *Emma*, while others are related to *Madame Bovary*, explains why they involve different kinds of pretense.

Yet reference to a fiction is insufficient to individuate kinds of pretense. *Emma* and *Madame Bovary* each constitute a prop for imaginings about a variety of characters, not just their heroines. How do we distinguish the aspects of a novel that count as props for particular characters? Appeal to the merely syntactic name-types in the text (e.g., the word ‘Emma’) will not help, since it is only under interpretation that certain parts of the text count as about the character. Once we admit semantic interpretation, however, we return to the problem of how to distinguish between kinds of pretense about Emma Woodhouse and kinds of pretense of (say) Harriet Smith without invoking fictitious objects. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this line of argument.) Anti-realists have not provided a clear solution to this problem. Assessment of the pretense theory therefore awaits a developed proposal about how to individuate semantic content consistently with anti-realism.

In the absence of such a proposal realism is more attractive. From the realist perspective, statements or thoughts about Emma Woodhouse are genuinely about a fictitious object—a different one than statements or thoughts about Emma Bovary—and this object figures in their semantic contents. Realists thus argue that they can provide a simpler, more unified account of discourse about fictional characters than anti-realists, while retaining the intuition that many statements, such as “Emma Bovary is a fictional character,” are literally true. Of course if there are no fictitious objects, a theory that postulates them, no matter how elegant, is unacceptable. If there is no phlogiston, statements apparently about phlogiston are not about anything—even if postulating phlogiston would make it easier to do semantics. The realist must offer positive reasons to think that there are fictitious objects.

§3. Realism and literary practices

Realists argue that our ordinary literary practices—our practices of reading, writing, thinking, and talking about fiction—commit us to fictitious objects: existent abstract objects in roughly the same ontological category as novels, plots, and rhyme schemes. Despite the able defense of non-existent and non-actual objects by such philosophers as Terence Parsons (1980) and Graham Priest (2005), skepticism about the ontological status of these entities makes the postulation of existent abstracta the most attractive version of realism. In what follows I use the term ‘realism’ exclusively for this view.

There are two versions of realism. According to *internal realism*, fictitious objects are abstracta such as person-kinds, roles, or character-types (Wolterstorff 1980; Currie 1990; Lamarque 2003, respectively; see also Zalta 1988). Like the rhyme scheme of a sonnet, these are eternal, uncreated entities, delineated or constituted by sets of properties; for every set of properties, there is a corresponding object. In the case of fictitious objects, the individuating properties are those the character has from a perspective “internal” to the fiction, such as being a young woman or being a Danish prince. Authors may be said to create characters, but only in the sense of making them *fictional*, by creating the narratives in which they appear. According to *external realism*, fictitious objects are more like novels, literally created by authors and dependent for their continued existence on texts and readers (Kripke unpublished; van Inwagen 1977; Howell 1983, 1996; Salmon 1998; Thomasson 1999). On this view, fictitious objects are individuated by such “external” properties as having been created by Tolstoy, being introduced on the first page of *Emma*, etc., rather than by properties attributed in the story.

As previously noted, one motivation for realism of either kind is the intentionality, or object-directedness, of thoughts and discourse about fictional characters (Thomasson 1999). Thoughts about Raskolnikov are about *Raskolnikov*, not Fyodor Karamazov or Hamlet. They often function as singular thoughts: in imagining that Hamlet hesitates, I am not thinking

about someone or other who hesitates, but about Shakespeare's character. Thus I can engage in "counter-fictional" imagining, as when I consider what would have happened had Hamlet killed Claudius sooner. Furthermore, we intersubjectively identify characters even when we disagree about them. For instance, some critics argue that the governess in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* reliably reports her struggle against the demonic influence of two ghosts on her young charges, others that she—the same character—is a deluded woman who murders an innocent child. And we do more than think about these characters: we pity Anna Karenina, despise Iago, and admire Atticus Finch. The realist argues that the best explanation of these phenomena is that we are thinking and talking about fictitious objects. In the absence of an accepted anti-realist account of intentionality, realists seem to have the upper hand on this issue (though see §5).

Another argument in favor of realism is provided by critical discourse, especially discourse that quantifies over fictional characters. "There are more flat fictional characters than round ones" not only seems to be true, it entails "There are fictional characters." Van Inwagen (1977, 1983, 2003) argues that there is no adequate paraphrase of such claims that preserves logical entailments without quantifying over fictional characters. If our best theory of literature quantifies over fictional characters, then by the standard Quinean criterion of ontological commitment we are committed to their existence.

Anti-realists may reply to this objection in one of two ways. First, they may argue that contrary to appearances, statements like "There are more flat fictional characters than round ones" do not have the same logical form as (say) "There are more small lakes than large ones," and therefore do not enter into the same kinds of entailment relations. The claim that the surface grammar of sentences may belie their logical form is a familiar one, explaining for instance why "No-one came to the party" has a different logical form from "Sam came to the party," and thus why the latter but not the former entails that someone came to the party; or why inferences about 'the average family' do not yield conclusions about a particular, average family. One might argue that the term 'fictional characters' makes a complex semantic contribution to sentences containing them, analogous to 'the average family'; or one might deny that all serious uses of quantifiers are existentially committing (cf. Azzouni 2004). These options are consistent with the semantic interpretation of fictionalism mentioned above, and are likewise controversial (see Stanley 2001).

The alternative, in line with the pragmatic interpretation of fictionalism, is to argue that although "There are more flat fictional characters than round ones" has exactly the logical form it appears to have, and thus entails "There are fictional characters," neither the premise nor the conclusion should be taken seriously. If discourse about fictional characters involves pretense, the conclusions of inferences apply only within the pretense. Similarly, given the assumption that the logical laws in the game authorized by *The Portrait of a Lady* are the ones we take for granted in the real world, "Isabel married Gilbert" entails that there are at least two individuals who married *in the game*, but entails nothing about the number of people married in the actual world. Quine's criterion of ontological commitment assumes the serious use of quantifiers. The realist's insistence that critical discourse about fictional characters is serious arguably begs the question against the pretense theorist.

A third argument in favor of realism is that the existence conditions for fictitious objects are so minimal that there can be no reason to reject them. All that is required for there to be fictitious objects is for an author to write a fiction in which she pretends to refer to an individual (Thomasson 2003a, 2003b; Schiffer 1996). As Thomasson puts it, "to accept that Austen wrote certain sentences in a novel pretending to refer to one Emma Woodhouse (not referring back to any actual person), but deny that she created a fictional character, is a mere distortion of ordinary usage" akin to accepting that there are baseball games in which teams change sides after every three outs, but denying that there are innings (Thomasson 2003a,

149). Once we accept that there are works of fiction, there can be no justification for denying that there are fictitious objects.

There are, however, two worries about this realist appeal to our literary practices. First, the strategy cannot be restricted to fictitious objects. There are established practices of talking about and quantifying over mythical creatures (Zeus, Santa Claus), failed scientific posits (Vulcan, phlogiston), impossible objects (the round square), figments of the imagination, etc. Salmon (2002) argues that there is no good reason to acknowledge the existence of Sherlock Holmes that does not also apply to Vulcan; the fact that one case springs from pretend reference and the other from failed reference is not ontologically relevant. Caplan (2004) extends the argument to merely imagined objects, such as the three shiny apples I am currently visualizing. While my thinking about them does not create any (concrete) *apples*, on this view it does create abstract objects. To accept this view is to accept that not only fiction, but also failures to refer and episodes of imagining, are sufficient to create abstract objects. Many would find this conclusion implausible.

The second problem is that our ordinary practices of engaging with fiction do not definitively determine the ontological status of fictional characters. It is part of this practice that we deny the existence of fictional characters; we do not, unless gripped by philosophical theory, similarly deny the existence of novels or plots. Moreover, even if we take our ordinary practices to support realism, they are indeterminate about the nature of fictitious objects. On the one hand, we say that the Ulysses of Dante's *Inferno* is the same character as the Odysseus of Homer's *Odyssey*, even though he differs in important respects. This feature of our practice is captured better by external realists, for whom Dante's intention to refer to Homer's character suffices for the identity, than by internal realists, for whom different abstract objects are delineated by the different sets of properties in each fiction. On the other hand, we sometimes distinguish between Dante's and Homer's characters, precisely because the authors attribute different properties to them. We also think of characters as repeatable types, such as the Villain of folktales or the traditional Faust character (Lamarque 2003).

Lamarque (2003) argues that the identity conditions for fictitious objects are interest-relative. For literary historical reasons we might be interested in broadly defined character-types ("scorned woman"), while for purposes of close textual analysis we pay attention to the individual character (Medea). Given this variation, there may be no answers to questions about when we are dealing with the same character or how many characters there are. For instance, in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Tess is arrested at Stonehenge by sixteen policemen, who are not otherwise distinguished. Are there sixteen fictional characters? Is the 'man in the corner' of one fiction the same character as the 'man in the corner' of another? Thomasson (2003a) says that we should not expect answers to these questions, because the existence and identity conditions for fictitious objects are determined by practices whose informal rules are vague and imprecise.

One might take these indeterminacies to be a reason to reject fictitious objects (cf. Adams et al. 1997). But given the difficulty of providing identity conditions of other abstract objects such as novels and plots, and the fact that anti-realists must also explain how we identify characters, this may not be a devastating objection. If we are willing to accept that there are novels and plots, perhaps we should accept fictitious objects (and mythical creatures, etc.). The interesting question becomes not whether there *are* fictitious objects, but what they *do*. Realists claim that the postulation of fictitious objects provides a smooth semantic account according to which much of our discourse about fictional characters is literally true. I consider this claim in the next section.

§4. Speaking of fictional characters

Readers of *Pride and Prejudice* care about Lizzie Bennet, hope she will marry Mr. Darcy, become frustrated at her stubbornness, and delight in the happy ending. These responses are basic to our engagement with fiction. According to the realist, however, Lizzie and Darcy, as abstract objects created or delineated by Austen, do not have properties like being a man or woman or being in love. (Presumably, it is merely a convention that we use the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’ for them.) While we might *imagine* that Lizzie is stubborn, this is not actually so. It would seem, then, that for the realist “Lizzie is stubborn” cannot be literally true, just as the anti-realist claims.

There are three different realist strategies for addressing this issue. Some realists distinguish two ways in which a property can be predicated of an abstract object (van Inwagen 1977; Zalta 1988). On this view, Lizzie has the property of being stubborn, but in a sense special to abstracta—call this *being stubborn**—different from the one in which ordinary people have that property. So “Lizzie is stubborn” is literally true only if it means *Lizzie is stubborn**. If it means that Lizzie is stubborn (the way people are), it is literally false, since it is only according to the fiction that she is. The result is an ambiguity in predications of fictional characters (cf. Hanley 2003).

A different realist approach is to claim that insofar as we adopt a perspective “internal” to the fiction—the perspective from which Lizzie is a human being—we do not refer to fictitious objects. It is only when we step outside this perspective and speak seriously that we do so. On this view, wherever a predication of a fictional character can be prefixed by ‘according to the story,’ there is no reference to a fictitious object (Kripke unpublished; Currie 1990; Lamarque and Olsen 1994). In these cases, speakers continue the author’s pretense that there is such a person; where no prefix is available, as in critical discourse, they refer to a fictitious object. An obvious problem with this proposal is that it fails to offer a unified account of discourse about fictional characters, since it makes characters’ names ambiguous: in some contexts ‘Lizzie’ refers, in others it does not (Salmon 1998).

The realist who wants to avoid either kind of ambiguity will say that although “Lizzie is stubborn” refers to a fictitious object, the statement predicates of it a property that it does not possess (in any sense). Just as it is only according to *Candide* that Lisbon is visited by its eponymous hero, it is only according to *Pride and Prejudice* that Lizzie is stubborn (Salmon 1998; Thomasson 1999). “In the novel, Lizzie is stubborn” is therefore literally true. When we drop the prefix, though, we say something literally false; in such cases, we are engaged in the pretense that the character is a human being. While the invocation of pretense might seem to make the postulation of a fictitious object superfluous, the realist can argue that unlike the anti-realist who appeals to pretense, she has an account of what makes the pretense “about Lizzie.”

Even so, the proposal has at least one unintuitive consequence. As already noted, our basic response to fiction is to imagine what is “fictionally true.” Though it is fairly clear what it means to imagine a person or place to be different than it is, it is more difficult to grasp what it means to imagine that an abstract object has the kinds of properties that can only belong to a concrete object (Thomasson 2003b). This sounds rather like asking us to imagine, of the number Three, that it visits Lisbon; or that the Constitution is stubborn. It is more plausible to say that we simply imagine that there are such *people* as Lizzie and Candide, for instance by imagining that the author’s use of a name leads back to a real person. Given that the ability to imagine that there are things which there are not is perfectly familiar, postulating an abstract object only seems to obscure matters.

A more significant problem for every realist theory is the unsustainably sharp distinction between the internal and external perspectives (Friend 2000; Pelletier 2003). Whereas the anti-realist claims that no statement about fictional characters is literally true, the realist distinguishes between statements that are (“Candide is a fictional character”) and

statements that are not (“Lizzie is stubborn”). It turns out that much of our discourse falls into the latter category. Because claims such as “I pity Isabel Archer” cannot be prefixed, some realists contend that my pity is directed at the fictitious object Isabel (Kripke unpublished). Surely, though, it is only from the internal perspective that Isabel deserves pity, if on the external perspective she is an abstract object that cannot suffer. Similarly, the realist cannot treat “Holmes is more brilliant than Poirot” as literally true, because as an abstract object neither Holmes nor Poirot is literally brilliant, or intelligent, or even a bit clever. They are only brilliant-to-such-and-such-a-degree *according to the stories*.

The realist might concede that these cases involve pretense, but deny that this is so for serious critical discourse. Such a denial does not seem consistent with critical practice, however, which typically involves a mix of perspectives. Critics are often concerned with the interpretation of fictional content, as in the debate over the interpretation of *The Turn of the Screw*. The critics engaged in this debate typically write as if the governess were a person. Even when critics acknowledge the fictionality of characters, they rarely drop the pretense entirely. In his lecture on Austen, A. C. Bradley writes, “In all her novels, though in varying degrees, Jane Austen regards the characters, good and bad alike, with ironical amusement, because they never see the situation as it really is” (Bradley 1993, 355). In the book section of the *Guardian*, we discover that Mr. Darcy was recently voted “the fictional character women would most like to invite to a dinner party,” which leads the critic to reflect that “women are swooning over a fictional character who is the epitome of the dominant patriarchal male” (Potter 2004). The realist cannot treat these claims as literally true.

The same mix of internal and external perspectives is evident in many works of fiction. In John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, for example, the narrator identifies himself as the author of the fiction we are reading and intersperses chapters about the fictional events with chapters about his own technique. Near the end of the novel the narrator/author inserts himself into the story and sits across from his main character on a train in order to contemplate what to do with him—that is, how to end the book. Such *reflexive fictions*, which acknowledge their own fictionality, are not limited to postmodern novels. Here is a passage from Fielding’s *Tom Jones*: “As we have now brought Sophia into safe hands, the reader will, I apprehend, be contented to *deposit her awhile, and to look a little after other personages*, and particularly poor Jones, whom we have left long enough to do penance for his past offences” (quoted in Pelletier 2003, 199; his italics). As Pelletier argues, fictions can treat fictional characters *as* fictional characters without “stepping outside the pretense or breaking the rules of fiction” (199). The apparently serious metafictional claim that Sophia is a fictional character (a personage) can be embedded within the pretense of the novel.

These observations lend support to the anti-realist contention that pretense pervades all kinds of fictional discourse. Yet the anti-realist seems to be just as committed as the realist to the problematic distinction between the internal and external perspectives. Walton distinguishes between the kinds of pretense involved in different games of make-believe: in the official game with *Anna Karenina*, “Anna commits suicide” counts as true, but “Anna was created by Tolstoy” does not. A statement such as “Tolstoy’s most famous fictional character commits suicide” appears to involve at least two different kinds of pretense. Walton could reply that such statements suggest an unofficial game of make-believe in which there are fictional characters and they possess both “internal” and “external” properties. This reply requires an explanation of how to individuate games of make-believe or kinds of pretense, however, which the pretense theorist has not provided.

In a sense the difficulty here is not nearly so pressing for the anti-realist as for the realist, since for the former there is no contrast between what Anna is *really* like and how we imagine her to be. Unlike the distinction between literally true claims and claims involving

pretense, the line between kinds of pretense need not be sharp. There is ample evidence that we slip easily between games of make-believe in other contexts. Studies of childhood pretense, for instance, indicate that young children can keep track of multiple games of make-believe simultaneously, while also keeping track of what is and isn't pretend (see Gendler 2003). Again, though, the claim that we can slip "between" games of make-believe presupposes a way to distinguish those games.

§5. *Assessing the theories*

Let us take stock. According to the anti-realist, there are no fictitious objects; therefore statements about fictional characters cannot be literally true. So in talking about fictional characters we engage in the pretense, established by authors of fiction, that there are such-and-such persons, places, and things. According to the realist, there are fictitious objects; therefore statements about fictional characters can be literally true. But because fictitious objects are so unlike the way we imagine them, only a small proportion of our discourse actually is. So in talking about fictional characters we (usually) engage in the pretense, established by authors of fiction, that there are such-and-such persons, places, and things. With respect to the literal truth of claims about fictional characters, realists fare little better than anti-realists.

Even if realists admit a greater role for pretense, however, they still seem to have the advantage in explaining the intentionality of thought and discourse about fictional characters. By contrast with anti-realists, they have a ready answer to the question of why certain kinds of pretense are about one fictional character rather than another. Yet this advantage is not as great as it appears.

It will be recalled that according to realists, decisions about the identity of fictitious objects are inevitably imprecise and interest-relative. If this is so, it appears that such objects play no role in explaining how we identify fictional characters. I say that the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* is reliable; you say that she is deluded. We are disagreeing about the same character, but are we disagreeing about the same fictitious object? If so, which object? The realist answers, plausibly: the one in the novel. But this answer is problematic. For internal realists, determining whether or not the governess is delusional (by interpreting the text) just *is* deciding which abstract object—the one defined by delusion or the one defined by heroism—is the one in the novel. If James's novella is ambiguous between these interpretations and we might adopt either depending on our interests, it is indeterminate whether we are talking about one fictitious object or two (or more).

The external realist seems able to avoid this result because she does not individuate fictitious objects by the properties attributed to them in stories. She can claim that the disagreement is about a single fictitious object, namely the one created by James, introduced on such-and-such page of the novella, and so forth. Yet the same difficulty arises for transfictional discourse. If I identify Dante's Ulysses with Homer's Odysseus and you don't, our discussion of *The Inferno* may or may not be about the same fictitious object.

Even if we accept realism, then, we must determine whether there is one or more fictional characters in a work—a matter for the interpretation of the text given our interests—to decide whether we are dealing with one or more fictitious objects. Of course if we accept anti-realism we require the same kind of interpretation to decide whether we are dealing with one or more kinds of pretense, and anti-realists have not satisfactorily addressed this problem. Yet there is reason to think that an anti-realist account is required independently of issues to do with fiction and fictional characters, since there are a wide variety of domains in which we seem to be talking or thinking about the same thing even when there is no thing we are talking or thinking about. Once we have such an account, it is not clear why we need fictitious objects.

The realist faces a dilemma. If she admits that there are *any* instances in which we talk or think about what does not exist, an explanation of what makes our thought and discourse “about the same thing” that does not appeal to abstract objects will be required. In that case, the anti-realist could invoke the same explanation for fictional characters. Alternatively, the realist could deny that in such cases we are talking or thinking about nothing: instead, we are referring to abstract objects. But if every thought or utterance is guaranteed to have a real object (cf. Thomasson 1999, 90), what reason do we have to think that the object involved in my thoughts is ever the same as the object involved in yours? We require a means of individuating the abstract objects involved in different thoughts about Anna Karenina or in distinct visualizations of three apples—one that does not appeal to the objects themselves, since their identity is precisely the issue. Without such an explanation, abstract objects could not be used to individuate semantic contents, and this potential advantage of realism over anti-realism would be lost. But with such an explanation, it seems that the anti-realist would have the tools necessary to explain the intentionality of thought and discourse about fictional characters without ever invoking fictitious objects.

To sum up. Whether or not we accept realism, we must allow pretense a significant role in explaining thought and discourse about fictional characters. And whether or not we accept realism, we require an explanation of why a given thought or utterance is about one fictional character rather than another. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that even if there are fictitious objects, they are superfluous to an account of how we engage with fictional characters.

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