

Fictional Truth and Formal Literary Devices

The aim of this paper is to show that current discussions of fictional truth fail to take into account an important class of literary phenomena which generate or contribute to fictional truth. Fictional truth concerns what is fictionally the case. Most of the time, authors tell us what is fictionally the case by *describing* what is fictionally the case. However, describing or otherwise providing descriptive content is not the only way in which authors create fictional truths. Formal (as opposed to descriptive or semantic) aspects of literature, such as repetition, rhythm, sounds, and font create many different kinds of literary effects, the creation or portrayal of fictional truth being one of them. For instance, Faulkner uses italics to indicate flashbacks in *The Sound and the Fury*, Woolf uses sibilants to convey the narrator's attitude towards Mr. Ramsey in *To the Lighthouse*, and Camus uses repetition to highlight a particular psychological feature that affects Meursault in *The Stranger*.

Though many philosophers and literary theorists have provided sophisticated discussions of literary formal features, none of them have been in connection to fictional truths. Thus, my goal is to first establish that formal features do contribute to fictional content and second, to argue that an adequate theory of fictional truth must be able to account for how formal features generate fictional content. Towards the latter goal, I'll evaluate explicitism, implicitism, and make-believe, eventually concluding that implicitism alone accounts for fictional truths generated by formal features.

Explicitism, the view that what is true in fiction is expressed by explicit statements in literary works, is unsatisfactory because it excludes fictional content created by features other than the literal semantics of declarative sentences. Insofar as implicitism is free from this constrain, it seems more promising as a theory of fictional truth. However, implicitism must meet certain conditions in order to be deemed a satisfactory. I will discuss David Lewis's theory to elaborate on the conditions.

In "Truth in Fiction," Lewis suggests fictional truth is the "joint product" of the explicit content and a "background" consisting either of real-world facts or beliefs overt in the community of origin. Though Lewis notes that we import much real-world facts into the fictional world, it seems that his theory leaves no room for formal features of the kind we discussed above. He mentions "explicit content," which sounds like "things that were explicitly or literally said," but formal features of literature don't literally say or describe anything. Though devices may contribute to or generate fictional truths, it's not quite right to say that they "describe" those truths.

However, there's an easy fix available: If we were to expand the scope of "explicit content" of the work to include formal features—say, by interpreting "explicit content" not to mean "what has explicitly been expressed" but to mean "what is explicitly part of the novel"—then Lewis's theory might be flexible enough to accommodate how formal features add to fictional truth. Though there are reasons why this hasn't been the most natural interpretation of his theory, this more charitable interpretation renders Lewis's theory the best theory of fictional truth currently available.

Another prominent theory that I assess is Walton's theory of Make-Believe. Waltonian Make-Believe appeals to the notion of pretense in understanding the nature of representational art. The key insight is that representational art can be a prop that guides our make-believe engagement with fictional worlds. According to Walton, fictionality consists in the prescription to imagine; something is fictional if it is appropriate for a given game of make-believe.

Unfortunately, make-believe provides us neither the perspective nor the conceptual tools to recognize and study the effects of formal devices. One of the limitations of make-believe is that it doesn't leave much room for *how* the text is written or presented since the focus is *what* the text is prescribing to imagine. In order to recognize the formal features of the work itself, the reader needs to step outside of the world of make-believe (i.e. the fictional world) and recognize the prop as a prop in the actual world. However, doing so would disrupt the make-believe, and so the theory isn't able to explain how formal features do things to the content of make-believe. Similarly, whatever it is we're supposed to be doing to the content of make-believe in light of formal features doesn't seem to be the kind of thing that we would *imagine* doing because of a prescription. It's something we do *to* our imagining because it concerns the manner or mode in which we make-believe.

Ultimately, given the indispensability of formal features in some generations of fictional truth, any adequate theory of fictional truth would need to be able to account for formal features' work. Implicitism seems the most promising towards this end.