CHAPTER ONE

FICTIONALITY AND IMAGINATION RECONSIDERED

KENDALL L. WALTON

What are fictional truths? What is it for a proposition to be fictional ("true in a fictional world")?

In *Mimesis as Make-Believe* and elsewhere, I proposed that a proposition is fictional just in case there is a prescription to the effect that it is to be imagined. More precisely, a proposition is fictional in (the world of) a particular work, \( W \), just in case appreciators of that work are to imagine it, just in case full appreciation of \( W \) requires imagining it. After running with this definition for many years, and seeing others take it on, it finally dawned on me that it is only half right. Prescriptions to imagine are necessary but not sufficient for fictionality.

Before explaining this, it will be helpful to remind ourselves of an important feature of imagining, a respect in which imaginings differ from beliefs.

1. Imagination (and Belief)

Several theorists have remarked that imaginings (propositional imaginings) are much like beliefs with respect to their functional role. One similarity is supposed to be that "imagination preserves the inferential patterns of belief." Inferences from a set of imaginings (together with some beliefs) to further imaginings correspond to inferences from a set of beliefs to further beliefs. This mirroring of inference patterns is supposed to be true not only for free standing imaginative experiences, e.g. daydreams, but also for imaginative responses to fiction. We imagine what is made explicit in a work of fiction. Then we draw inferences from it; we infer that certain other propositions are also true in the fiction, and we imagine them. These inferences are supposed to parallel inferences we
would make from propositions we believe initially to others which we come to believe as well.

Inferences from imaginings to imaginings often do parallel inferences from beliefs to beliefs, but very frequently they do not. In the case of imaginings in response to works of fiction, they do (roughly) when what I call the Reality Principle of implication is operative. However, the applicability of the Reality Principle is very limited. I will focus now on an especially fundamental way in which imaginings differ from beliefs, one that makes for differences in inference patterns that do not result from limitations of the Reality Principle.

Fictional truths come in clusters, and so do one’s imaginings of the propositions that are fictional. Different clusters correspond to different fictional worlds, the worlds of different works of fiction, or different fantasies or daydreams. Fictionality is always relative to a particular fictional world: a given proposition is not fictional simpliciter, but fictional in the world of a particular novel, story, movie or daydream. Much of the recent literature on the imagination ignores this clustering, or pays insufficient attention to it.

The importance of the clustering lies partly in how imaginings combine with one another. Contents of different clusters don’t combine to justify inferences in the way that contents of the same clusters do. If \( p \) and \( q \) are both fictional, and belong to the same cluster, usually the conjunction, \( p \& q \), is fictional also, and is to be imagined. This is not so if \( p \) and \( q \) belong to different clusters, different fictional worlds.

Reading Kafka’s Metamorphosis I imagine that a boy was transformed into a bug. Reading War and Peace, I imagine that things like that just don’t happen. There is no pressure at all to imagine the conjunction, to imagine that someone turned into a bug and people never turn into bugs, nor is there any tension between the conflicting imaginings.

While watching a performance of Othello, I fantasize about taking Othello aside, telling him about Iago’s treachery and forestalling the threatened disaster. I imagine doing this, but I also imagine, in accordance with the events on stage, that no one intervenes and that the tragedy unfolds as scheduled. I certainly do not imagine that I do and do not reveal Iago’s treachery to Othello, and there is no tension at all in the fact that I have imagined two incompatible propositions. These imaginings belong to different clusters.

Nothing quite like this clustering is true of beliefs. Any beliefs that I possess will combine with any others to justify the inference to their conjunction. If I find myself believing contradictory propositions, I have a problem. I feel obliged to change one or the other of my beliefs to avoid being committed to the contradictory conjunction.

2. Fictionality

My original account of fictionality, again, is this: a proposition is fictional in (the world of) a particular work, \( W \), just in case appreciators of that work are to imagine it, just in case full appreciation of \( W \) requires imagining it. This proposal hasn’t been especially controversial. Many writers have gone along with it, sometimes changing the terminology. However, it simply will not do, and not just because it is a little fuzzy, which of course it is, but also because it gives us a necessary condition for fictionality in a particular world, but not a sufficient one.

Counterexamples to the sufficiency of my account, cases in which appreciators of a given work are to imagine propositions that are not fictional in it, come in several varieties. I will present more counterexamples than are needed to make this negative point, in order to block some tempting but inadequate fixes, fixes that work for some kinds of cases but not for others. (Also, some of the examples are interesting in their own right.)

The most obvious counterexamples are what some call iconic metarepresentations. Vermeer’s Woman Standing at a Virginal depicts a framed picture of Cupid on the wall behind the woman.

Viewers of Woman at a Virginal are to imagine a picture of Cupid. But they are also to imagine Cupid, a naked winged child with a bow, they are to imagine that there is such a child. Full appreciation of the painting includes looking at the part of the canvas that depicts the picture, and being induced to imagine Cupid, or in any case a child with wings and a bow, to imagine that there is such a being. Yet it is not fictional in Woman at a Virginal that there is a child with wings with a bow.

The point of imagining Cupid is, of course, to discover what the picture on the wall depicts. We learn that it is fictional in Woman at a Virginal, that the picture on the wall is a picture of Cupid, when we find ourselves imagining Cupid. The depicted frame lets us know that we are to imagine that there is a picture of Cupid, and that it is fictional in Woman at a Virginal that there is only a picture of Cupid there.

We can think of the small portion of the canvas inside the depicted frame as having its own fictional world, one in which it is fictional that there is a child with wings. That part of the canvas illustrates the content of the depicted picture, in the world of the larger picture, but it remains true that spectators, qua viewers of Vermeer’s painting as a whole, are to
imagine that there is a child with wings, although this is not fictional in Vermeer’s painting.

Fig. 1.1: Vermeer, A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal (c. 1670–1672, National Gallery).

Fig. 1.2: Photograph of a doll

We can’t always recognize a part of a work and attribute to it its own fictional world. It is fictional in fig. 1.2 that there is a doll, a representation of a child with red hair wearing a frilly pink dress. How do we know that that is what the doll represents (and that it is a doll)? Looking at the photographic depiction, we imagine a child with red hair wearing a frilly pink dress; we imagine that there is one. There is a prescription, to viewers of the photograph, to imagine this; qua appreciators of the picture, they are to do so. But it is not fictional in the photograph, nor in any part of it considered alone, that there is a child with red hair wearing a frilly pink dress.
Many other iconic meta-representations are counterexamples to my account of fictionality. There are stories within stories (e.g. *One Thousand and One Nights*), dream sequences in film, Hamlet’s play about Gonzago’s murder in Shakespeare’s play, and of course *Rashomon*.

So far, the problematic examples are instances of meta-representations, works representing the contents of other representations, but we shouldn’t rush to find a solution specific to meta-representations. Counterexamples of other kinds are on the way.

Some fictions represent illusions, and their contents. When the illusion is suffered by a character, the work will qualify as a meta-representation. I mentioned dream sequences in film, and there are ordinary point-of-view shots: First, a shot of a character eating mushrooms, then wobbling around, stoned, with glazed eyes, followed by a shot of a purple elephant flying through the air. It is fictional that the character hallucinates a purple elephant, that he seems to see a purple elephant, but it isn’t fictional in the film that there is a purple elephant. In order to ascertain what the character seems to see, the viewer must, in the second shot, imagine seeing a purple elephant, imagine that there is a purple elephant. Is the viewer to imagine merely *seeming* to see a purple elephant, and not that there is one? How does she figure out what it is that she is to imagine seeming to be the case? She finds herself imagining seeing a purple elephant, and there being one.

Sometimes a work represents simply an illusory situation, without portraying anyone suffering from the illusion. It is fictional in the photograph, fig. 1.3, that the cactus looks soft and cuddly, but (by virtue of obvious background information) fictionally it is actually prickly, not soft and cuddly. The viewer is to imagine the cactus being soft and cuddly, but it is fictional only that it *looks* soft and cuddly. It is by engaging in this imagining that they discover how fictionally the cactus looks (how fictionally it would look were someone to see it from the right point of view).

Since it is not fictional, in the world of the picture, that anyone experiences this illusion, it is a stretch to call this a meta-representation. But it does involve what we might call a “secondary content.” Now for counterexamples to the prescribed imagining account of fictionality that don’t even have a secondary content. Imaginings of propositions that are not fictional, which do not help to determine what is fictional; they serve different purposes.

Fig. 1.3: Fuzzy cactus.

Sometimes appreciators experience a (real) illusion, an illusion that a work makes it fictional that $p$ when it doesn’t, and often it is not fictional that there is an illusion that $p$, not even an illusory situation. Appreciating the work fully might require experiencing the real illusion (and recognizing that it is an illusion). The work may be designed to give appreciators the impression of, to hint at, its being fictional that $p$, without making it so. Appreciators may be expected to notice that it seems to them as though $p$ is fictional, and this may involve their being induced to imagine $p$.

It seems as though the guy on the left, in fig. 1.4, has a golf ball for a nose, as though this is fictional. We can hardly help imagining that he does, but it is arguable that this is not fictional, not true in the picture world, that this impression is illusory. Nevertheless, to appreciate the photograph fully (whether or not the photographer intended this) arguably requires imagining a person with a golf ball nose. One misses something important about the picture if one does not imagine this.
Jumonji's photograph (fig. 1.5) is disturbing. The explanation may be that viewers imagine, implicitly, a headless person. But it isn't fictional, in the picture, that anyone is missing a head; nor, I think, is it fictional that there is an illusion, or illusory situation, that someone is headless.

Finally, a couple of more obvious examples: Background music in film can easily create an illusion, give the impression that a certain proposition is fictional, which turns out not to be. A murder mystery with misleading hints will lead readers to think that, e.g., the butler is the villain and to imagine that he is, though they discover in the end that, say, the UPS deliveryman, not the butler, is guilty of the crime. If the misleading impression is due to conventions of the literary genre, conventions as to who can be the villain in this kind of story, or on the tendencies of this particular author, or because at a certain point we think there aren't enough pages left in the book to make the UPS man rather than the butler the villain, it is likely not to be fictional, true in the story world, that there is any sort of illusion that the butler did it.

3. Tempting Solutions

The murder mystery example will suggest a solution, one that fails to generalize to several of the other cases. We are expected to imagine, when we read Chapter 3, that the butler did the dastardly deed, but by the end of the novel, when all is said and done, we realize that we are to imagine not this, but that it is the UPS delivery man who is guilty. So, the suggestion is, only what is to be imagined at the end, after we have experienced and absorbed all relevant aspects of the work, is fictional in the work. This solution does not work for the Vermeer painting, or the photograph of the doll, or the Jumonji photograph. As long as we see Vermeer's entire painting, including the depiction of Cupid, we are to
imagine seeing a child with wings, to imagine that there is a child with wings. We are not supposed to stop seeing the marks as a child with wings, or seeing a child with wings "in" the marks, when we notice the depicted frame. Jumonji's photograph doesn't stop being disturbing when we figure out that it is not fictional that the man is decapitated. The hypothesis (which I take to be plausible at least) is that we continue to imagine his being headless as long as we find the picture disturbing.

Gregory Currie suggested another solution (though he didn't claim that it works for all the examples).\(^16\) It rests on a distinction between imaginings that are mandated or prescribed, and what appreciators must imagine in order to engage in the mandatory ones, i.e. imaginings which, although not themselves prescribed, are necessary for full appreciation of the work in question. The idea is that only the content of the former imaginings count as fictional, true in the fictional world. Viewers of The Woman at a Virginal are to imagine a picture of a child with wings. In order to do so, they must imagine a child with wings, but, according to this suggestion, this imagining is not itself prescribed. Therefore, it is fictional in The Woman at a Virginal that there is a picture of a child with wings, but not that there is a child with wings.

This is not a viable general solution. It won't help with the non-meta-representational cases, and there are serious worries concerning the meta-representational ones.

It is not clear that there is a non-question-begging way of distinguishing between imaginings that are prescribed and ones that are not. What grounds are there for holding that imagining a picture of a child with wings is prescribed and imagining a child with wings is not, other than that the content of the former is fictional and that of the latter is not? Vermeer certainly intended and expected viewers of his painting to imagine a child with wings—the marks he made on the portion of the canvas within the depicted frame are designed to get viewers to imagine this.

It seems that there could be a mandate to imagine a child with wings, a mandate to imagine a picture of a child with wings (partly) by imagining a child with wings. Suppose that there is. Suppose that whatever social conventions or facts about the artist or natural propensities (or combination thereof) are needed to establish this prescription do in fact obtain. Surely this would not make it fictional in The Woman at a Virginal that there is a child with wings.

The primary interest, or a very substantial one, of some meta-representational stories—stories representing the telling of other stories—is in the internal story or stories, rather than the frame story. It would be strange indeed to deny that readers of One Thousand and One Nights are prescribed to imagine the content of the stories Scheherazade tells. Yet it is fictional in One Thousand and One Nights, the frame tale, only that Scheherazade tells these stories, not that they are true.

As I mentioned, this proposed solution fails our non-meta-representational examples, several of them anyway. It probably doesn't apply to the whodunit story, if the illusion that (fictionally) the butler is the villain is due to traditions of the genre or the number of pages left in the story. Imagining the butler's guilt may not be necessary in order to imagine propositions that are fictional. The same may well be true of the Jumonji example—imagining a headless person is not needed in order to discover what else we are to imagine.

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I don't know how to fill the gap; I don't know what, in addition to a prescription to imagine, is needed to make a proposition fictional in the world of a given work. I am not sure what sort of account of fictionality we should expect. I and others have mostly relied simply on intuitions about what is fictional in particular cases, usually without invoking this or any definition of fictionality. We can continue doing this, for some purposes, at least insofar as our intuitions are shared, but of course we would like to know as well as we can what lies behind the intuitions.

What I liked about my original account was that it seemed to capture what is important in our experience of fictions, viz. the imaginings we actually engage in, and our judgments or impressions about which imaginings are prescribed, and which are optional. We now see that appreciators also judge, on some basis or other, which of the propositions whose imagining is prescribed are fictional in the work, and which are not. This too is an important aspect of our experience of fictions. We somehow "construct" a fictional world, recognizing a subset of the to-be-imagined propositions as constituting it. We deploy a more substantial notion of fictionality than I previously thought, one that is not in any obvious way reducible to or explainable in terms of imaginings.

(When daydreaming, I imagine certain things, sometimes deliberately, sometimes spontaneously, more or less at random. But then I decide—rather than discover, in the case of daydreaming—which imaginings to accept for my daydream, which of their contents to count as fictional in the daydream.)
4. Seeing the Unseen; Reporting the Unreported

Whatever fictionality exactly is, the fact that the content of prescribed imaginings need not be fictional will help us to deal with a couple of awkward kinds of representations, one in the visual arts and a rough analogue in literature.

Fig. 1.6 is a picture of a Rhamphorhynchus, a Pterosaur from the Jurassic period. Let's call him "Ralph." Given obvious background information—the absence of humans 150 million years ago—I take it to be fictional in the picture world that no one is observing Ralph. Viewers of the picture imagine that this is so. But in looking at pictures, I claim, viewers imagine seeing the objects or kinds of objects that are depicted, and I understand imagining seeing something to involve imagining that it is seen. Do we, then, observing Ralph's portrait, imagine that Ralph is and is not seen? No, but we do imagine that he is seen and also imagine that he is unseen. Is this a problem? No.

A partial analogue in literature of the seeing-the-unseen problem is the reporting-the-unreported problem. A story ends with the words, "and no one lived to tell the tale," or less explicitly, the narrative indicates that all of the characters and all witnesses to the story events die off on a remote island or planet, implying that (fictionally) no one was able to report the events. In either case, readers are to imagine that the events go unreported. However, it is often claimed that all or most stories and novels have narrators; many do in any case. Readers imagine the words of the text being uttered (or written) by a person, the narrator, who thereby reports the events of the story. Do readers of stories like those I just described imagine that someone reported the story events and no one did? No, but readers do (in some instances) imagine that someone reported the events, and also imagine that no one reported them. Is this a problem? Not much of one.

Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft deny that to view a picture is to imagine that what it depicts is seen. Rather than imagining seeing Ralph, with seeing in the content of the imagining, they will say, we imagine Ralph and the rest of the scene in a "visual manner." This nicely sidesteps the seeing-the-unseen problem, if it is right, but no analogous resolution of the reporting-the-unreported story is available. We might expect that the seeing-the-unseen case is to be resolved in whatever way works for the reporting-the-unreported case, making postulation of a visual mode of imagination unnecessary (for this purpose at least). As a matter of fact, seeing-the-unseen will turn out to be more easily treated (without appealing to a visual mode of imagination) than reporting-the-unreported is.

Fig. 1.6: Rhamphorhynchus, artist John Klausmeyer, © University of Michigan Museum of Natural History.

It is probably obvious how I will defuse these puzzles, the first one at least. In our previous examples, the counterexamples to the prescribed imagining account of fictionality, appreciators do and are expected to imagine propositions inconsistent with one another. We imagine that there is a child with wings, and we imagine that there is only a picture of a child with wings. We imagine both:

... that there is a purple elephant, and also that there is no such thing.
... that a person has a spherical white nose, and also that he doesn’t.
... that the cactus is soft and fuzzy, and also that it is prickly, not soft and fuzzy.
... that someone's head is missing, and also that it isn’t.
... that the butler did it, and also that he didn’t.

There is nothing at all paradoxical or problematic about these pairs of imaginings, nothing strained or strange about imagining each of the two conflicting propositions. There is no pressure at all to imagine their contradictory conjunctions: that there is and is not a purple elephant, for example, or that a person does and does not have a spherical white nose.
Why? Because the different imaginings with conflicting contents are not associated with the same fictional world; they don’t belong to the same cluster. It is fictional in the world of the movie that there are no purple elephants. Viewers imagine this. They also imagine that there is a purple elephant, but it is not fictional in that world that there is a purple elephant. Viewers manage somehow to exclude this proposition from the world of the movie.

* * *

Observing the Rhamphorhynchus picture, one imagines Ralph unseen. One also imagines seeing Ralph. These imaginings do not belong to the same cluster, the same fictional world. The content only of the former belongs to the world of the picture, even though both imaginings are prescribed for appreciators of it. So the two imaginings live happily together in the viewer’s experience. This is like the meta-representational cases: One imagines seeing Ralph, thereby ascertaining what it is that one is to imagine occurring unseen.

Untold tales are a little more complicated, and they come in several varieties which need to be distinguished. We do experience tension, in some cases more than others.

Consider a (relatively) straightforward instance of a novel with an explicit narrator, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck Finn is the narrator. It is fictional in the novel world that Huck and his friends, Tom Sawyer and Jim, had various adventures, and that he reports them by means of the words of the text. We would have a jolting paradox if at the end of the novel Huck declared, “no one lived to tell the tale,” or if Twain had made it obvious for one reason or another that Huck couldn’t have reported his adventures. (Suppose the novel ended with, “The posse chasing Jim shot me dead and dumped my body in the river. It was never found and no one ever knew”), It would be hard to deny, in that case, that it is fictional in the novel world that Huck recounted his adventures and also that he couldn’t have done so and didn’t, and there would be pressure to imagine that he did and did not recount them.

But “no one lived to tell” stories can be much less jolting, especially when the narrator is (as some say) not a “character.” But what does this mean? A narrator is a fictional person. Doesn’t that make him or her a character? Not all narrators have names. Many don’t refer to themselves in the first person (or at all), and many do not participate in the actions that they report; they just report them. But none of this disqualifies them as characters.

Let’s not worry about whether narrators count as characters; consider instead what fictional worlds they belong to. In the case of stories with nameless, “omniscient,” narrators, who do not refer to themselves and do not participate in the action, I think it is often reasonable to recognize a world, call it the “primary” story world, containing the events of the story but not the narrator (perhaps this is what is meant when a narrator is said not to be a “character”). It is fictional in this world that the events occur but not that the narrator reports them. Readers do imagine the narrator’s reporting them (and probably expressing attitudes about them in doing so), but this imagining does not belong to the cluster associated with the primary story world. We can recognize a “secondary” story world, in which the narrator does report the events of the story.

This imagining does, however, help readers determine what is fictional in the primary story world. The kinds of events the reader imagines the narrator reporting are the ones that (fictionally) occur unreported by the narrator, in the primary story world. In the special case of a “no one lived to tell” story, it is fictional in the primary story world that the events are unreported, not reported by anyone, and readers imagine that this is so. There is no tension between this imagining as part of the primary story world cluster, and readers’ imagining the narrator’s reports, since the latter imagining does not belong to this cluster. (The reader’s imaginings, in the primary story world cluster, won’t include any imaginings about the narrator, neither that she reported them, nor that she did not.)

So far, this is much like the Rhamphorhynchus case (except that the reporting of the story events occurs in a work-world, whereas the seeing of Ralph occurs only in what I have called the spectator’s game-world.) However, there is an interesting difference, an added complexity in the story case. The narrator reports that “the events were unreported.” We imagine this, though not as part of the primary story world cluster. Viewers of the Rhamphorhynchus picture, although they imagine that Ralph is seen, do not imagine his being seen to be unseen; they don’t imagine seeing that he is not seen. When the narrator is “omniscient” it will be fictional, in the secondary work world, that what they report is true, hence fictional that they report unreported events. So readers are expected to imagine that these events are and are not reported, this imagining belonging to the secondary work world. There remains the primary work world cluster, however, in which readers imagine only that the events are unreported.
When narrators are explicit, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, and also *One Thousand and One Nights*, we will be much less inclined to recognize a primary work world which does not include the narrator’s reporting. That there is no sharp line between these two kinds of cases should be of no concern.

**Bibliography**


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**Notes**

1 Thanks to Carola Barber, David Braddon-Mitchell, Gregory Currie, Daniel Groll, Stacie Friend, David Hills, Fred Kroon, Patrick Maynard, Jerome Pelletier, Shaun Nichols, Dawn Phillips, Denis Robinson, Steven Yablo.

2 I understand novels, stories, paintings, films, etc. to have fictional worlds. There are also fictional worlds of dreams, daydreams and children’s make-believe games.

3 Walton 1990 (hereafter *Mimesis*), 39–41, 57–61. I added an important qualification which needn’t concern us now: “A proposition is fictional ... if it is to be imagined (in the relevant context) should the question arise.” (*Mimesis*, 40. Emphasis in original.)

4 The dawning was provoked first by conversations with Jerome Pelletier. Stacie Friend and Patrick Maynard also called my attention to counterexamples.


6 Currie & Ravenscroft 2002, 12–14; Nichols & Stich 2003, 29–32. All agree that imaginings differ functionally from beliefs with respect to their connections with action.


10 An exception is Skolnick & Bloom, 2006.

11 A certain kind of clustering of beliefs does occur. One might entertain two different sets of beliefs in different contexts, without paying attention to how they are related, and without actively believing conjunctions of propositions believed in the different contexts. I may not notice that in one context I believe p, and in another q. But if someone points this out to me, I will certainly expect to be committed to p&q. And if I should notice that I believe p in one context and not-p in another, I will feel obliged to revise one or the other of the beliefs.

12 Lewis’ 1983 account of “truth in fiction” is very different, but his objections are different from mine. His definition is meant to capture the circumstances by virtue of which propositions are fictional (what I call the “mechanics of generation”), whereas mine is based on the function that fictional truths serve.

13 It is true that a proposition is fictional if and only if it is to be imagined, if this means that it is fictional in *some world or other*, if and only if it is to be imagined.

14 I am assuming that, in the cases we are interested in at least, imagining a φ entails or implies imagining that there is a φ. Obviously the reverse entailment doesn’t hold.

15 Thanks to Paul Bloom.

16 Currie, personal communication.

17 I ignore the fact that other Jurassic beasts see Ralph.

18 I won’t argue for either of these claims here. We needn’t suppose that in imagining seeing Ralph I imagine that I, Kendall Walton, see him. We have the puzzle if I imagine merely that Ralph is seen.

19 Currie & Ravenscroft 2002, 30–31 take the latter to be about as problematic as the former is.
20 What I have called “reporting” narrators, in contrast to “storytelling” narrators. See *Mimesis*, § 9.6.
21 Lewis 1983, 274–275 understands “and no one lived to tell the tale” cases as instances of impossible fictions. This makes them more problematic than many of them need to be.
22 Currie & Ravenscroft 2002, §2.2.
23 My treatment in *Mimesis* of the “Seeing the Unseen” problem was based on a notion of “silly questions.” What I say here can be construed as an explanation of why the relevant questions are silly.
24 The famous opening sentence of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer’; but that ain’t no matter.”
25 The novel could have taken a fantastic turn, however, and had Huck reporting from the dead through a medium (*Cp. Rashomon*).
26 In *Mimesis*, 285–287, §9.6 I proposed recognizing two distinct work worlds for a single work, in somewhat similar instances.

CHAPTER TWO

AGAINST THE IRRATIONALITY ARGUMENT FOR FICTIONAL EMOTIONS

CAROLA BARBERO

According to Colin Radford, our apparent emotional ability to respond to fictional characters and events is “irrational, incoherent, and inconsistent.” His thesis is based on the assumption that existence beliefs are necessary for us to be rationally moved by something and that such beliefs are lacking when we read works of fiction. But since it happens that such works do move us at times, he concludes straightforwardly that our capacity for emotional response to fiction is irrational. The aim of *his* paper is to analyze the arguments Radford gives in favour of his thesis and to put them to the test. In particular, I will examine the lie argument, the stuffed tiger argument and the tennis player argument. They do not seem to work and therefore I will conclude that Radford’s irrationalist solution to the paradox of fiction is wrong.

1. The Lie Argument

In a famous paper, Colin Radford claims that our apparent emotional ability to respond to fictional characters and events is “irrational, incoherent, and inconsistent.” His view is based on the firm conviction that existence beliefs are necessary for us to be rationally moved by something. Since such beliefs are lacking when we are moved by fiction (because we do not believe that fictional characters and events are actual), he concludes that our capacity for emotional response to fiction is irrational.

It has often been noticed that this claim is implausible insofar as it runs against our own intuitions, and much has been written to explain in more convincing ways what happens in such cases. My aim here is to analyze the arguments Radford gives in favour of his thesis to put them to the test.
From Fictionalism to Realism

Edited by

Carola Barbero, Maurizio Ferraris
and Alberto Voltolini
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