

GORMAN, David. Fiction, Theories of. In  
*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*.  
Ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laure  
Ryan. London; New York : Routledge. 2008, p.  
163-167. ISBN 978-0-415-77512-0.

feminist narratology chiefly concentrates on studies of literary texts written by women. Kathy Mezei's 1996 edited collection gives special emphasis to studies of Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf among other British novelists. Feminist narratology in the past decade has continued to concentrate more on narrative discourse than on story, with insightful studies on closure by Alison Booth (1993), on narration by Alison Case (1999), and on narrative voice by Joan D. Peters (2002).

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### FICTION, THEORIES OF

Throughout the history of literary study, the overwhelming majority of narratives of interest to critics have been fictional; indeed, the terms *fiction* and *\*narrative* seem often to be used as synonyms. Yet the concept of fiction, when it has been a topic of reflection at all, has remained a puzzle; during the past century, theories differing widely both in details and broad orientation have been proposed to explain it. Moreover, since some narratives are non-fictional, it is clear that the synonymous usage of the terms is loose at best and confused at worst. In any case, a related problem that has recently attracted attention is that of the symptoms or signposts of fictionality.

### Theories of what?

It is very easy to recognise fiction, but very hard to explain it. Let us begin halfway between recognition and explanation, with a definition: fiction is one kind of intendedly but non-deceptively untrue discourse (see INTENTIONALITY). Each element of this definition could do with some unpacking, and some qualification.

Fiction must consist of 'intendedly untrue' statements because otherwise there would be no way to recognise it, or to distinguish it from factual discourse. (There are theorists who do not accept such a distinction; and, if the *\*panfictionality* thesis is correct, this entry is superfluous.) Fictional statements need not actually be untrue because it would not make any difference to a work's fictional status whether any of the statements made in it turned out to be true by coincidence – hence the disclaimer familiar to film-goers about the possibility of accidental resemblances between the persons or *\*events* represented to actual persons or events (see ROMAN À CLEF). Likewise factual discourse is intended to be true, although it may not be: mistaken statements are still factual ones.

The falsity of fictional discourse must be 'non-deceptive', if only to distinguish fiction from lying (and again there have been those who would deny the distinction, as far back as Plato). Lying is another type of factual discourse; if the deceptive intention behind a lie were recognised, it would fail. Likewise if someone failed to recognise the non-deceptive intention motivating fictional discourse, then what we might call the fictional transaction would fail. Therein lies the humour in



Don Quixote's reaction to the puppet-show (Part 2, ch. 26), when he storms the stage and beholds puppets that he takes to be villainous Moors.

Finally, fiction is 'one kind' of at least partly untrue discourse produced without intention to deceive because there are other kinds – perhaps the most important being figures of speech such as \*metaphor or \*irony (New 1999). What distinguishes fiction from tropes in particular is, first, that whereas it is individual sentences that are figurative, fictional discourse must present a \*narrative, which typically involves a series of sentences. A deeper distinction may lie, as Aristotle recognised, in the subject-matter of fictional narrative: 'persons engaged in action' (*Poetics* 1448a). On this criterion, even a one-sentence narrative can be differentiated from a sentence that features a trope.

These clarifications leave open a few other frequently asked preliminary questions. Here are three, with brief responses. (1) The definition given is limited to fiction in the linguistic medium: does it make sense to talk about fiction in, e.g., visual media (see PICTORIAL NARRATIVITY; VISUAL NARRATIVITY)? Although a number of recent theorists – notably Kendall Walton – have attempted to develop an account of fiction that cuts across \*media, the scope of the present discussion will be limited to verbal fictions, and indeed to those that are recounted; even \*drama will be left aside. (2) The definition seems to assume an absolute fact/fiction distinction, as if 'factual' were synonymous with 'non-fictional': can there not be borderline or hybrid cases? Although some of the material in the final section of this entry may be pertinent to this question, the rest of it will be limited to clear-cut cases of fiction. This has been the practice of most theorists, who assume that a good explanation of the fact/fiction distinction can be extended to account for such border phenomena as historical fiction (see HISTORICAL NOVEL), the new \*journalism, and the various hybrid forms sometimes labelled 'faction' (see HYBRID GENRES). Some theorists put \*myth or \*autobiography into this category, although both assignments are controversial. Finally, a non-issue: (3) cannot the boundary between fiction and non-fiction fluctuate? There is virtually no theorist of fiction who would deny that a text once regarded as factual can be read as fiction in a later period; the significant question concerns the theoretical significance of such fluctuation.

Theories of fiction usually approach the question of what fiction is and how it can be

understood either through \*pragmatics or semantics (see NARRATIVE SEMANTICS). Semantic approaches look for something distinctive in the content of fictional discourse, such as the use of proper names (see NAMING IN NARRATIVE), the role (if any) of \*reference or \*truth in fiction, and the nature of fictional entities (see EXISTENT). Pragmatic approaches focus on the production and \*reception of fiction – that is, on the activity of fiction-making, including the intentions and conventions involved, and the social role that fiction plays. Historically, most theorists have pursued one approach or the other; the relationship between the two kinds of theories deserves more attention. It is arguable that they are complementary, semantic theories dealing with what is inside (as we might put it) of a piece of fictional discourse, and pragmatic theories with what happens on the exterior.

### Approaches through pragmatics

It was Sir Philip Sidney who gave the first distinctively pragmatic account of fiction: 'Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth'. While the best-known of the modern pragmatic analyses, by John Searle, cannot be reduced to an aphorism, the core thesis seems much the same, rewritten in the terminology of \*speech act theory: 'the pretended illocutions that constitute a work of fiction are made possible by the existence of a set of conventions which suspend the normal operation of the rules relating illocutionary acts and the world' (1979 [1974–1975]: 67). Since fiction involves statements, it is this kind of illocutionary action that Searle has primarily in mind. On his account, the rules relating the world to this illocutionary act require of a statement-maker (a) a commitment to the truth of what has been stated, (b) an obligation to provide evidence for that truth if the statement is challenged, and (c) the intention to be recognised as conforming to rules (a) and (b) in making the statement. When these rules are suspended by the conventions of fictional discourse, a speaker can no longer be held responsible for any of these things. In short, the fiction-writer does not perform the illocutionary act of stating, and thus is not accountable for the possible falsehood of what he or she says.

There is an obvious limitation to this account: it is entirely negative. A theory of fiction must explain what the fiction-maker actually does.



Searle prefaces the analysis just quoted with a general description of how novelists and other fiction-writers pretend to perform illocutionary acts, but it remains undeveloped. There is a further problem with the analysis in terms of pretence: even if it is correct to say that the fiction-maker is pretending to do something (e.g., to make serious statements), the author/performer cannot do so in isolation (see AUTHOR). An adequate account must recognise that there is an \*audience involved, and include it in a complete explanation of the phenomenon of fiction. Searle's achievement has been to offer an initial formulation of the pretence hypothesis. His treatment has inspired a number of alternative proposals, which follow his in explaining fiction primarily in pragmatic terms, but which also aim to address the shortcomings of the pretence hypothesis.

Gregory Currie's account elaborates on the thought that fiction-making is a kind of communicative action. 'Fictive utterance' – telling a fictional story – is not a pretence of (non-fictional) assertion, but instead a parallel activity. Just as the intention of someone making an assertion is that his or her listeners will take it to be true, someone uttering a fictional statement intends that the audience will make-believe that it is true. Thus the concept of pretence drops out of this account as superfluous. An objection to Currie's theory is that, in severing fictional statements from factual ones so completely, it leaves fictional utterance undefined. The discourse of fiction seems on the face of it to include statements, not some completely different kind of speech act; it is a virtue of the pretence hypothesis to recognise this point.

The notion of make-believe invoked by Currie in his account of fiction shows the influence of Walton, who develops the theme of make-believe much more fully. Like Currie, Walton downplays the relevance of pretence, partly because the term suggests a unilateral action on the part of the fiction-maker. Fiction is essentially a shared activity, involving the audience of a narrative as well as its maker, an activity that Walton finds it more appropriate to call make-believe. He also rejects Searle's assumption that fiction is a matter of linguistic pretence: for a sign in any medium, 'to be fictional is [...] to possess the function of a prop in a game of make-believe' (1990: 106). While few theorists have followed Walton in his effort to locate and explain the phenomenon

of fiction across all the representational arts, the major obstacle to accepting his version of the pragmatic account, even when limited to the verbal medium, is that notions of play and make-believe simply seem too vague, too thin, or too amorphous to explain an activity as specific and robust as that involved in the fictional transaction. If anything, it seems that the order of explanation should run the other way, with play explained as an elementary form of fiction-making (see CHILDREN'S STORYTELLING; NARRATIVE, GAMES, AND PLAY).

In the most detailed formulation of a pragmatic account yet offered, Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen describe fiction as a social practice, governed by rules or conventions, in which stories are told that their audiences treat as consisting of assertions and other standard illocutionary acts, while knowing that they are not. Although Lamarque and Olsen prefer to call this make-believe rather than pretence, they provide the fullest analysis of the notion first invoked by Searle.

### Approaches through semantics

Reversing the usual order of presentation, pragmatic accounts of fiction have been surveyed here before semantic ones, in recognition of the fact that content alone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of fictionality. Nevertheless, many theorists of fiction have felt that there is something distinctive or otherwise characteristic in the subject-matter of fictional discourse, beginning with Aristotle. In *Poetics* 9, he utilises his logical terminology to draw a famous distinction between history, the subject-matter of which is 'particulars', and poetry, which deals in 'universals' (1451b) – despite appearances to the contrary (see ANCIENT THEORIES OF NARRATIVE (WESTERN); HISTORIOGRAPHY).

The philosophers who developed modern logic around 1900 began by replacing Aristotelian categories like universal and particular with an apparatus that includes singular terms (such as names), which serve to denote objects, and predicates, which express properties. Given these categories, fiction can be explained semantically as discourse involving sentences that are false because they contain singular terms that are 'empty' – that fail to denote anything. This became the standard account of fiction among analytic philosophers.

although a variant developed among philosophers who preferred to call sentences with empty names not false, but lacking in truth value (neither true nor false). In any case, the basic principle of semantic theories as initially formulated is that fiction does not share factual discourse's aim of being true (see Beardsley 1981 for an overview). The problem with this thesis is that it leaves the specificity and variety of fiction unexplained: obviously, a sentence can fail to be true in many, many different ways – otherwise literary fiction would not teem with all the \*characters and events with which it does. To analyse fiction as a general use of false sentences does nothing to explain its specificity.

One way of addressing this problem using the resources of modern logic is to reinterpret the discourse of fiction so as to replace the 'empty' singular terms that occur in it with a concatenation of predicates. Thus the name 'Sherlock Holmes' would be re-constructed as an individuating description of the character ('a nineteenth-century British amateur detective who...'). This analysis, the best-known version of which may be Nelson Goodman's, has the advantage of allowing for the distinct content of each fictional narrative without surrendering the claim that some of the expressions that appear in these narratives do not denote anything. Its shortcoming is that it fails to account for statements in a narrative that contain a mix of denoting and non-denoting expressions ('The letter reached Gatsby while he was still at Oxford').

Another approach adapts the theory of \*possible worlds developed by modal logicians. David Lewis has offered the most suggestive philosophical account thus far of the usefulness of the concept in dealing with fiction: if we think of a fictional narrative being told 'as known fact rather than fiction', surely we are thinking of a possible world. Meanwhile, a number of literary theorists have pursued the general program of analysing the familiar but vague notion of fictional worlds in terms of possible worlds; prominent figures include Lubomir Doležel, Thomas Pavel, and Marie-Laure Ryan. The greatest virtue of this kind of approach is that it restores legitimacy to talk about truth and falsity within fictional discourse. There has been some dispute among interested theorists over the way (or ways) in which the conception of possible worlds applies to the study of fictional narrative, but no strong objections to the program have yet emerged. Its failure to gain universal acceptance

thus far may have something to do with the elaborate metaphysical apparatus it involves – the theoretical question is whether the concept of possible worlds offers the simplest way to explain fictionality.

The nature and relevance of possible worlds has been one topic among several extensively discussed by semantically oriented theorists; others include the ontological status of fictional beings and the cognitive value of fiction. Such issues may belong more to metaphysics or epistemology than to literary or aesthetic theory. What they have in common is that they pertain to \*reference; but while this has been almost the exclusive focus of semantic theories of fiction, a topic equally important in semantic theory, inference, has remained untouched (one exception is Lewis 1978, which raises the question of how to draw valid conclusions from premises that include factual truths and statements true only in some fictional work). Since inference and reference are complementary matters, it seems likely that, once theorists turn their attention to the logical connections between statements within a narrative (as well as their connection to statements about the narrative), it should have a major effect on the referential issues that dominate the current scene.

### Signposts of fictionality

A recent development in the theory of fiction has been an interest in the question of whether there can be markers in a stretch of discourse that identify it as fictional. In part this has been a reaction to a claim made in passing in Searle's analysis of fiction: no purely linguistic or textual property of a narrative can serve as a criterion of its fictionality (1979: 65, 68). Most philosophers of language would likely agree with Searle's generalisation; but literary theorists more sensitive to the specifics of literary discourse have questioned it. Dorrit Cohn and Gérard Genette, for example, both cite the work of Käte Hamburger, who in the 1950s undertook to develop a poetics of literature based on the \*phenomenology of language (1973). In the course of her investigation, Hamburger observed that there are linguistic forms unique to fictional discourse, but she did not systematically pursue the suggestion, which was in any case only a byproduct of her research. Following



Cohn's, Genette's, and others' elaborations of Hamburger's ideas, a list of possible identifying criteria (or signposts) for fiction would include the following:

- omniscient \*narration or unrestricted \*focalization;
- extensive use of \*dialogue, \*free indirect discourse, or interior monologue (see STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND INTERIOR MONOLOGUE);
- anaphoric use of pronouns lacking antecedents;
- detemporalised use of verb tenses and temporal adverbs, to indicate internal chronology only (e.g., 'Now was the time'; see TENSE AND NARRATIVE);
- use of deictics and spatial adverbs to indicate frame-internal reference only ('There on the left was Ellis Island') (see DEIXIS: SPACE IN NARRATIVE);
- distinguishability of \*narrator from \*author;
- use of \*metalepsis;
- paratextual markers (e.g., *Smith: A Novel*).

There is no consensus as to whether any of these linguistic usages or literary devices can serve as universal indicators of fictionality, thus refuting Searle's claim. This remains an area for investigation and discussion. (Philosophers like Searle may well be influenced by the correct idea that there can be no indicators of factual discourse, since if one was proposed, it would immediately become a challenge to fiction-writers to co-opt: hence the frequency of the fictional imitation of non-fiction.)

A further motivation for theoretical caution concerning the signpost question lies in the uncertain status of theorising about fiction. This entry started by distinguishing between a definition of fiction and an explanation of it – and the devices just listed have been proposed as something else again, namely qualities that a work or passage exhibits as a consequence of being fictional. The problem is that many elements of our definition – non-deceptive untruth for example – could also be classified as markers of fiction; and likewise items in the list of markers – say, the author/narrator distinction – might plausibly be used in an explanation of the concept, or else in a definition. A resolution to the signpost question depends upon sorting out these matters.

The significance – indeed the urgency – of the signpost question comes from what, for theorists of fiction, has been far and away the most

important development in recent narrative theory: the dawning realisation (first articulated by Cohn and Genette) that narratology, despite its pretensions to generality, has so far been confined to fictional narrative. Extending the concepts and categories of what has become 'classical' narratology to non-fiction is not a straightforward matter. The restricting factor appears to be the poorly understood nature of factual discourse. If so, then the way to a truly universal narrative theory appears to run through the theory of fiction.

SEE ALSO: non-fiction novel; philosophy and narrative; text-world approach to narrative

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