

Slithy Magradols and Plegrantic Toves: The Problem of Non-sense in Fiction

Abstract

Accounts of truth in fiction normally face two problems: How do we deal with impossible fictions and how do we handle unreliable narrators? I argue that there is another problem: How do we handle nonsense in fiction (e.g., stories by Lewis Carroll or "technobabble" in *Star Trek*)? Similar to the issue of reference failure for fictional characters where terms do not refer, nonsense in fiction inserts terms that have no content at all. I contend that accounts of truth in fiction that rely on "told as known fact" or pretence/"make believe" cannot determine the truth of propositions that possess contentless terms. I will examine several of these kinds of accounts (Lewis (1978), Currie (1990), Byrne (1993), and Phillips (1999)) and show how nonsense fiction undermines them. I will also show that nonsense permeates most fiction and is not an isolated issue. Then I will offer a possible account of truth in fiction that handles this problem.

Accounts of Fiction:

Lewis (1978)

Analysis 2: A sentence of the form "In the fiction f , ϕ " is non-vacuously true iff, whenever w is one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of f , then some world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is true differs less from the world w , on balance, than does any world where f is told as known fact and ϕ is not true. It is vacuously true iff there are no possible worlds where f is told as known fact.

Currie (1990)

(3) " $F_s(P)$ " is true iff it is reasonable for the informed reader to infer that the fictional author of S believes that P .

The informed reader is one that has all of the information necessary to make reasonable inferences about the fictional author. The fictional author is constructed by the reader's make-believe and is "telling [them] the story as known fact" (76). The reader starts "with no assumption about the fictional author more powerful than the assumption that he belongs [...] the community from which the text actually issues" (78).

Byrne (1993)

Analysis 4

It is true in fiction F that p iff the Reader could infer that the Author in inviting the Reader to make-believe that p .

The text constructs through pragmatic inferences an ideal reader who constructs an ideal author that invites that reader to make-believe. (It's not circular... supposedly)

Phillips (1999)

(P): A sentence of the form 'In fiction F , ϕ ' is true iff it is reasonable for an informed reader to infer from the text that, under ideal conditions, the author of F would agree that ϕ is part of F .

F is a set of propositions. All we do is assess whether a proposition belongs to that set.

Text Analysis:

'Twas brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe; all mimsy were the borogoves and the mome raths outgrabe.

- (1) Slithy toves can gyre. T
- (2) It was brillig when the mome raths outgrabe. T
- (3) There are slithy things. T
- (4) Some borogoves were not mimsy. F

Lewis:

Can "Jabberwocky" be told as known fact in a collective belief world from its community of origin? Did the Victorians have beliefs about slithiness? Did the Victorians have beliefs about borogoves? Since these terms are nonsense (they have no semantic content), all that the Victorians would believe about them is that they are nonsense. Is it possible to tell someone nonsense as known fact? Suppose I told you that there is a magradol in this room. To deviate from failed reference objections, perhaps I say that this a plegrantic room. We have no beliefs about magradols or plegrantic things, only that those words are gibberish to us. It would seem as though there is no possible world in which (1)-(4) can be told as known fact and be a collective belief world of the Victorians, so it follows that they are all vacuously true. But (4) is false!

Currie:

In the fiction "Jabberwocky," (1).

As an informed reader I know that to the fictional author 'slithy', 'toves', and 'gyre' are nonsense because of the community from which the text issues. Does the fictional author believe that (1)? Can one have beliefs without content? [really, if anyone has examples, I'd like to hear them] If not, then it would seem as though the fictional author could not believe that (1).

Byrne:

The fact that to the actual author and to the actual reader the text contains nonsense is no barrier to what the ideal author is inviting an ideal reader to make-believe. The ideal reader would know the content of these terms and they would not be nonsense and so they could engage in make-believe about (1)-(4). However, there are no actual readers that can approximate the ideal one since they fundamentally lack the content of those terms. So, no actual reader can receive the invitation to make-believe. Yet, it seems that we can still assess the truth of (1)-(4).

Phillips:

The problem is that since the propositions in the set "Jabberwocky" contain nonsense and terms that fail to refer, how can we assess whether a proposition belongs to it?

Nonsense is essential to fiction:

When we talk of nonsense, most of the time it refers to the type found in works by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Made up words (e.g., ‘slithy toves’) or conjunctions of words that offer semantic paradoxes (e.g., ‘colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ if it was a part of a fiction) seem to be a rare occurrence and they are merely a curiosity in fiction (or tools in theoretical discourse), something to be found only on the fringes. However, I argue that non-sense is an essential component of fiction, that it is precisely the thing that makes it ‘fictional’.

Empty Terms/Reference Failure:

The most prevalent form of non-sense in fiction is typified by terms that do not refer. ‘Sherlock’, ‘unicorns’, and ‘pegasus’ are empty terms, they lack referential content.

Empty Descriptions/Descriptive Failure [not sure about the terminology here]:

The other side of nonsense is descriptions that lack definition. Words like ‘slithy’ and ‘gimble’ do not give us any indication as to what they are doing, they lack descriptive content.

[Any other examples?]

Stephen Pablo (2020) follows Kripke’s analysis of fictional names and argues that there is a distinction to be made between ‘slithy’ and ‘Sherlock Holmes’ in that the latter is more pretendable than the former. While Pablo argues that we can pretend that the conditions for reference are satisfied but we lack the ability to pretend something that doesn’t have descriptive content or literal meaning. Is this intuition true? Consider the following fictional sentence:

(5) Sherlock was in the Sistine Chapel.

I can pretend that the reference conditions for ‘Sherlock’ are satisfied as Pablo and Kripke suggest. What about an empty description? I could make an another fictional sentence like this:

(6) Sherlock gimbled in the Sistine Chapel.

Is (5) more pretendable than (6)? Why can’t we assume the conditions for description are satisfied much the same way as those of reference? I think Pablo isn’t arguing against that but rather the following sentence:

(7) Slithy toves gyred and gimbled.

When both empty terms and empty descriptions are paired, there seems to be a higher barrier to pretendability. So if pretence is necessary to fiction, there needs to be a way to pretend that (7) or at least adjacently pretend it.

Fiction^{DF}: Supposing an event or set of events such that there are some nonsense elements in it and that any nonsense elements that constitute it are given a sense.

The main thrust of my definition of fiction relies on the Aristotelian notion that the core of fiction is the plot.

“The most important of the six is the combination of the incidents of the story. Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life. [All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions that we are happy or the reverse.] In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the characters; they include the characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing. Besides this, a tragedy is impossible without action, but there might be one without Character.”
Aristotle, *Poetics* (1450a15-25)

My Solution:

F is a fiction.

s is an statement. [not sure what to call it, not sure if I want the connotation of a proposition]

E_F is the events/plot constructed by F.

E_{MF} is the events/plots that are fictionalized by the method M and constrained by F.

It is supposed in F that s is true iff s is coherent with E_F and relevant to E_{MF}

[If there is time I'll try to show how it deals with the problem]