

Fictional Characters, Real Interpretation Problems, and Complex Solutions

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Identity conditions for *ficta* in a Meinongian framework

- For all Meinongians, the set of the properties ascribed to a *fictum* within the relevant story is at least a necessary condition (Barbero 2005, Castañeda 1989, Voltolini 2006), or even a necessary and sufficient condition (Parsons 1980), for that *fictum*'s identity
- As a result, if one changes even the most irrelevant property ascribed to a *fictum* in that story, one gets a different *fictum*
- As a further result, different versions of the same literary work may contain different *ficta* – perhaps related with each other by weaker sameness relations (Castañeda 1989, Voltolini 2006) – if some properties ascribed to them in such versions change
- This alleged fragility of a *fictum* (Favazzo – Orilia – Paolini Paoletti forthcoming) may be welcome, since there are no stable criteria to single out for it a subset of essential properties (Thomasson 1999, Reicher 2010)

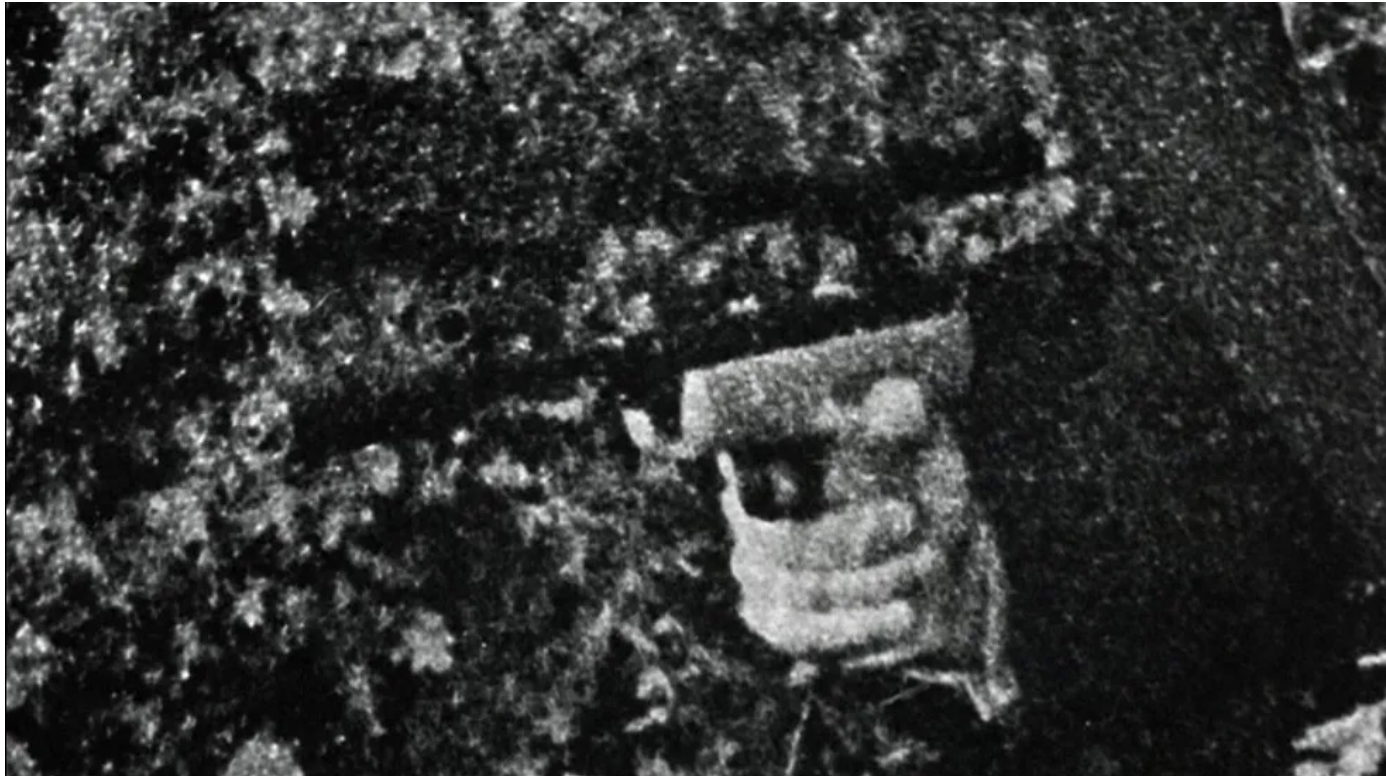
Examples

- If Don Abbondio had not met the Bravi at a certain crossing of a path coming from Lake Como, but had met someone else or had met nobody there, he would have been an utterly different *fictum*
- The *fictum* Fermo in *Fermo and Lucia*, the first version of Alessandro Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, differs from the *fictum* Renzo in *The Betrothed*, already because they are ascribed different names

The problem

- Certain properties are *explicitly* ascribed to a *fictum* in a story *overtly*, via the fact that such properties are analogously so predicated fictionally to a certain imaginary individual within the fiction underlying that story
- Such ascriptions may even be *discovered*, if for some reason it is not *prima facie* clear what is fictionally said in that fiction (suppose that its text is somehow corrupted, or that the narrator turns out to be unreliable – something admittedly not easy to settle)
- Such discoveries occur more clearly in pictorial works, in which there may be the famous *blow-up* phenomenon (through which one ends up seeing properties that are explicitly ascribed fictionally to an imaginary individual within a pictorial fiction and yet that are such, that one did not see them at first sight)

Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*



The problem (cont'd.)

- Yet such an explicit ascription may also occur *covertly*, if the fiction contains language used figuratively
- In that case, what is ascribed to a *fictum* is what the language figuratively used in the fiction actually ascribes (via a pragmatic process of some kind) to the imaginary individual figuring in it

Example

- As is well-known, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* starts with the sentence "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."
- On this basis, one might suppose that the rich bachelor Mr. Bingley, one of the main characters of Austen's story, has the property of *being in want of a wife*
- Yet in the fiction its narrator speaks ironically; in point of fact, what is fictionally the case is that *women* without fortunes need husbands and seek them out
- So, Mr. Bingley does not possess that property, for that property is not genuinely ascribed to him in that story

The problem (cont'd. again)

- Explicit ascription of properties is fundamentally based on what it is said/written in a text, modulo the factors that we have seen before; in normal cases at least, there is no matter of interpretation as regards the explicit content of a story, since the author merely decides what propositions (the standard meanings of certain sentences) constitute the story (Deutsch 1985, 1991)
- For example, Emma might not have been married to Charles Bovary only in the sense that Flaubert might have decided to differently write the story, by mobilizing a different proposition
- Yet some further properties are merely *implicitly* ascribed to a *fictum*, either via the endorsement of certain principles of generation (e.g., the Reality Assumption, the assumption that everything that is true is fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work (Friend 2017), or even the Genre Assumption, the assumption that the story belongs to a certain literary genre), or via certain inferences (possibly having to do with Gricean conversational implicatures, or anyway abductive ones) that are somehow legitimated by the fiction, in order to make it coherent, cohesive, elegant

Example (1)

- Gertrude, the nun of Monza of *The Betrothed*, has certainly the property of *having a pancreas*
- For although the *The Betrothed*'s narrator fictionally says explicitly nothing in this concern, certainly he fictionally says that Gertrude is a female human being
- By applying the Reality Assumption, since whatever is a female human being has a pancreas and the narrator never fictionally says that Gertrude is an alien, a cyborg or whatever else, the *fictum* of Gertrude also has that property
- Gertrude has also the property of *wearing wool socks*
- For although the *The Betrothed*'s narrator fictionally says explicitly nothing in this concern, by applying the Genre Assumption one may infer that a historical novel set in the 17th century would ascribe to nuns ordinary wool socks

Example (2)

- Gertrude, the nun of Monza of *The Betrothed*, is unanimously recognized to have the property of *having an illicit intimate relationship with Egidio*, the mischievous noble-like young guy who seduces her
- Yet the *The Betrothed*'s narrator fictionally says explicitly nothing on this concern; he limits himself to fictionally saying “the miserable girl replied” to Egidio's greetings, showing Manzoni's discretion
- Now, no principle of generation allows one to ascribe to Gertrude the above property
- Yet that ascription is strongly suggested by the fact that the narrator fictionally says that Gertrude kills one of her nun sisters, presumably in order for that illicit relationship not to be discovered
- Ditto for Emma Bovary: “elle s'abandonna”, when having her first intimate relationship with Rodolphe

The problem (final)

- Yet are there even further properties that may be implicitly ascribed to a *fictum* F ? May this ascription amend the seemingly intrinsic indeterminacy of a *fictum* (e.g., has Holmes or not a mole on his left shoulder)?
- Is it a matter of interpretation, since for some interpretations, F has the further property P , while for some other interpretations, F has the further property P' ?
- Here we are talking of interpretation in a *weak* sense, having to do merely with the factors (intentional, historical, ethico-aesthetical ...) that allow ascribing properties to a *fictum* which further determine the *content* of a story, not in the *stronger* senses of factors entering into that content itself or of extra-content factors (cf. Abell 2020, Favazzo – Orilia – Paolini Paoletti 2025) (since we are in a Meinongian framework, we rule out issues about interpretations of whether F in S is the same as F' in S' – in this framework there is no such issue – while we admit issues about interpretations of whether F in S is the same as F' in S)
- But if this is the case, then does not one have to conclude that for Meinongians, depending on which interpretation one adheres to, different *ficta* are mobilized, one having P , the other having P' ?

Example (1)

- According to Freud, Hamlet is a hysteric neurotic person suffering from the Oedipus' complex
- According to some others, Hamlet is a perfectly wise person merely pretending that he is mad
- So, are there for Meinongians *two* Hamlets, depending on which interpretation one adheres to?

Example (2)

- According to some interpretations, Gertrude and Egidio had a sexual intercourse (such interpretations may perhaps further distinguish themselves as regards the issue of *what* kind of sexual intercourse such guys definitely had – an against nature one, maybe?)
- According to other interpretations, they had no such intercourse, they merely had some power interests in common
- So, are there for Meinongians *two* Gertrudes, depending on which interpretation one adheres to?

The easy solution

- There is just an ideally correct interpretation
- Thus, only certain properties, but not other ones, must be implicitly ascribed to a *fictum*

When the easy solution works

- The easy solution works when one revises one interpretation in favor another while being told the relevant story
- This happens when the story is based on a *coup de théâtre*
- What was hardly understandable under the first interpretation turns out to be easily understandable under the second interpretation; *ficta* were erroneously attributed properties they never had
- Jokes, or even puns, are (mini)stories that work by virtue of such sorts of revisions in order to be funny

Examples

- In Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others*, the characters that one assumed to be for a long while to be human beings turn out to be ghosts
- This interpretation easily explains why they regularly meet no people when they get out of the house in which they live
- In the following joke, one is originally misled as to ascribing to the guys involved a homosexual relation, whereas in point of fact there is no such relation

The joke

A pilot, a steward, and a hostess survive a plane crash and drift for days in the ocean until they reach a small remote island, in the middle of nowhere. After some days, they get the idea that no one is coming to rescue them. It's a sad moment but life goes on, and the survivors set up camp, eat fish, drink coconut milk, and fall asleep under the beautiful sky. Some weeks pass. One day, the hostess says: 'Okay guys, we know we're here for a long time, possibly forever. I know you have needs, and I have needs too. We are good friends, we know each other well ... I think we can do something: I could have sex every day, one day with one of you, and the next with the other one, etc. And if anything goes wrong, if one of us wants to stop for any reason, we just stop without asking any questions. What do you think?' The two guys look at each other shyly and finally approve. It's the beginning of a new life. They make love every other day, everyone is satisfied, and they all live happily together. Sadly, one day, the hostess gets depressed. And after a few weeks of melancholy, she hangs herself from a tree and dies. The pilot and the steward are strongly affected. But they decide to be strong, and try to keep on living as well as they can. One day, one of them tells the other: 'You know ... we've known each other for a long time, and after all we've been through, I think we could try'. The other guy answers. 'Hey, I was thinking the same thing. Let's try, and if one of us wants to stop, no questions, we just stop'. And then, they have sex again, and everything is fine again. Until one day, one of them tells the other 'Hey ... I'm sorry but, you know, I feel bad about it, it's not as good as it was, it's **against nature**. We said that we could stop at any time, so, yeah, I think I want to stop'. 'Oh dear, I totally agree, it's not the same, we can stop, no problem.' 'So ... should we **bury** her?'

Yet the easy solution may not work

- Yet, who decides for the ideally correct interpretation (Stecker 2006)? The author? The critic? The reader?
- The answer, according to the easy solution, is: the text
- Yet this answer is not enough, since in many cases, the narrator deliberately leaves open whether the story ascribes to its *ficta* certain properties or not
- Indeed, whatever happens in the story is compatible with the idea that such *ficta* have those properties and that they fail to have them
- So, the idea that there is just an ideal correct interpretation does not seem to work («there is no ultimately valid, ‘true’ interpretation, because both the [textual] data and the inferential processes can be challenged» Hempfer 2024:23)

Example

- In Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, has the character Miles the property of *having met the ghost of the dead butler Peter Quint*, or is he only such that the character of the governess seems to see that ghost from the window she faces along with him?
- Henry James seems to have written the novel in such a way as to make it compatible with both interpretations

The Ingardenian stance

- According to Ingarden (1973), literary objects (whether works or fictional characters) are schematized objects
- Their schematized nature fulfills the synthesis between idealism and realism as far as the schema is an idealization, a formal structure allowing autonomy in respect to concrete characteristics
- The schema gives a form to the object leaving inevitably many aspects indeterminate, and these aspects may be fulfilled and somehow “concretized” during the reading and comprehension process of the text: “what is in question here are [...] certain *idealizations*, which are, so to speak, a *skeleton*, a *schema*, of concrete, flowing transitory aspects” (1973: 262)

Schematized aspects

“In a literary work only schematized aspects can appear, although in the reading they allow of various actualized aspects [...] It is frequently the case that represented objects are supposed to portray determinate real objectives. For example, the story in Romain Rolland’s novel *L’Ame enchantée* ‘takes place’ – as we usually say – in Paris. Various streets of the French capital are represented here. Let us assume that a given reader of this novel does not know Paris from its own experience. In reading, he naturally actualizes, among other things, the novel’s predetermined aspects of the given streets. However, since he has never concretely experienced these streets in primary perception, their actualization never succeeds in such a way that the contents of the aspects actualized by him could be similar in detail to the aspects he would have experienced had he once really seen the streets. Predetermined schemata of aspects are always being completed and filled out as one reads by various details which actually do not belong to them and which the reader draws from the content of other, formerly experienced concrete aspects. [...] it is necessary to apprehend the work in its schematized nature and not confuse it with the individual concretizations that arise in individual readings” (1973: 264-265).

Spots of indeterminacy

- When we read literature we fill out what is ontologically incomplete by conceiving it *as if* it were complete: “during his reading and his aesthetic appreciation of the work, the reader usually goes beyond what is simply presented by the text (or projected by it) and in various respects *completes* the represented objectivities, so that at least some of the spots of indeterminacy are removed [...] the literary work itself is to be distinguished from its respective concretizations, and not everything that is valid for the concretization of the work is equally valid for the work itself. [...] one and the same literary work can allow any number of concretizations, which frequently differ significantly from the work itself and also, in their content, differ significantly among themselves” (1973: 252)
- That explains not only why from a single schematized object we can derive different concretizations, but also why not all fillings are faithful to the work

Cont'd.

- There are many concretizations of a literary work, but none of them *is* actually the work itself: the ontology of the literary work is such that it can always be determinate further on
- Defending the distinction between the literary work and its concretizations does not mean to deny the possibility of a genuine access to the work in itself (Iser 1978), but rather to defend the peculiar ontological structure of the literary work characterized by an essential schematicity that may be fulfilled time after time in its spots of indeterminacy without never being threatened its essential identity

Incompleteness

- "We can say that [...] every literary work is in principle incomplete and always in need of further supplementation; in terms of the text, however, this supplementation can never be completed" (1973: 251)
- As Smith (1979) underlines, ontological incompleteness is the most important and radical difference between real and fictional individuals
- Whereas from an *ontological point of view* literary individuals are underdetermined and real individuals are totally determined, from an *epistemological* one what happens is exactly the opposite: nobody can know all the properties of a given individual or a given species, which are potentially infinite, while the properties of Madame Bovary are all known, since they are strictly limited by the narrative text, and only those attributes mentioned by the text count for the identification of the character
- I know M.me Bovary better than my sister. Who can say how many episodes of my sister's life are unknown to me? In contrast, by reading *M.me Bovary* I know everything there is to know which is exactly what Flaubert tells us

Indeterminacy and incompleteness

- Spots of indeterminacy are what sharply distinguishes real from literary objects. Real objects are ontologically determined under every aspect whereas literary objects are nothing but schemas, full of gaps that can not be fully filled
- Literary objects fail to satisfy the law of the excluded middle, since if they are not determined for what concerns property P , it is neither the case that they have P nor is the case that they fail to have P
- “If, e.g., a story begins with the sentence: ‘An old man was sitting at a table’, etc., it is clear that the represented ‘table’ is indeed a ‘table’ and not, for example a ‘chair’; but whether it is made of wood or iron, is four-legged or three-legged, etc., is left quite unsaid and therefore – this being a purely intentional object – *not determined*. The material of its composition is altogether unqualified, although it must be some material. Thus, in the given object, its qualification is *totally absent*: there is an ‘empty’ spot here, a ‘spot of indeterminacy’. As we have said, such empty spots are impossible in the case of a real object. At most, the material may, for example, be unknown” (1973: 249)

Consequences

- A *fictum* is in itself incomplete
- Pace Albrecht (2022), it cannot be grasped via thinner incomplete objects
- For this grasping may happen only as far as concrete objects are concerned, for which incomplete objects may be facets, or guises, that inhere to them (Meinong 1916)

Cont'd.

- It is not accidental that we are talking about literary characters and not fictional characters in general
- This sort of incompleteness depends on the fact that literary characters are grounded on imagination, which provides incomplete representations of what is about; if they are pictorial or movie characters, because we grasp them (almost) perceptually there are less elements of indeterminacy, i.e., less gaps in the work (Lamarque 2003: 44 n. 21)
- The repletion occurring in the last case may however not count as a legitimate way to fill the gaps, since it may not match the schema

Literary and movie characters: Fywell's Bovary

- “She was pale all over, white as a sheet; the skin of her nose was drawn at the nostrils, her eyes looked at you vaguely. After discovering three grey hairs on her temples, she talked much of her old age...Her eyelids seemed chiseled expressly for her long amorous looks in which the pupil disappeared, while a strong inspiration expanded her delicate nostrils and raised the fleshy corner of her lips, shaded in the light by a little black down” Chapter VII.



Literary and movie characters (Chabrol's Bovary)

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That's not how I imagined her

- While reading Madame Bovary we imagine what Emma looks like (we concretize her by ourselves), but on seeing Chabrol's film some (me) may say "that's not how I imagined her"
- The point here is, as Iser (1978) remarks, that the reader is able to visualize the main character for himself and when the character is offered, concretized by a complete and immutable picture, then the work of imagination is out of action. With the novel the reader must work by himself in order to summarize what he has read and consequently imagine the characters, whereas when watching films his experience starts with the physical perception of the concretization of someone's else

The composites

(<https://www.brianjosephdavis.com/the-composites>)

- What looked like Madame Bovary? “The Composite”, a project of Brian Joseph Davis, proposed to make an answer by visualizing the characters of literature in composite sketch thanks to the descriptions found in books. The Sketches are drawn with composite sketch software used by the police.

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But are we always invited to concretize?

Waiting for Godot (S. Beckett 1952)

- It does not even properly tell a story
- “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful”.
- Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for someone, Godot, who will not come
- From act I to act II nothing relevantly new happens, the general situation does not change
- Possible Beckett’s literary allusions: Simone Weil’s *Attente de Dieu* or Honoré de Balzac’s *Le faiseur* or *Mercadet*. But no new meaning would be added to the work itself or to our understanding of it
- Are we supposed to “fill the gaps”? To determine what is left underdetermined?
- “‘the places of indeterminacy’ are sometimes to be filled in, sometimes to be left open, and sometimes to be passed over completely” (Iser 1978: 175)

But are we always invited to concretize? *Waiting for Godot*

V: I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.

E: What exactly did we ask him for?

V: Were you not there?

E: I can't have been listening.

V: Oh . . . Nothing very definite.

E: A kind of prayer.

V: Precisely.

E: A vague supplication.

V: Exactly.

E: And what did he reply?

V: That he'd see.

E: That he couldn't promise

anything.

V: That he'd have to think it over.

E: In the quiet of his home.

V: Consult his family.

E: His friends.

V: His agents.

E: His correspondents.

V: His books.

E: His bank account.

V: Before taking a decision.

E: It's the normal thing.

V: Is it not?

E: I think it is.

V: I think so too.

E: (anxious). And we?

V: beg your pardon?

E: I said, And we?

V: I don't understand.

E: Where do we come in?

V: Come in?

E. Take your time.

V: Come in? On our hands and knees.

E. As bad as that?

V: Your Worship wishes to assert his prerogatives?

No!

- In this case, such places of indeterminacy are not to be removed
- The appreciation of Beckett's works needs the schema, the skeleton, to be perceived as such
- But if spots of indeterminacy are sometimes to be filled in and sometimes to be left open, how to decide what to do? Not by appealing to an ideally correct interpretation – there is none – but by paying attention to literary genre, cultural conventions, author's invitations

The complex solution (out of Ingarden)

- *Ficta* may have the properties that are ascribed to them within the relevant narrations either *determinately* or *indeterminately*
- *Ficta* are constituted only by the properties that are ascribed to them determinately; namely, the properties which constitute their schemas, i.e., both those explicitly ascribed to them, either overtly or covertly, and those implicitly ascribed to them
- Only when an interpretation becomes stable by virtue of some criteria of interpretation, it determinately yields to a *fictum* a further property constituting it, so that the property is *internally* predicated of it; otherwise, only a property of the kind *being P according to interpretation I*, corresponding to a property *P* with respect to which the *fictum* is incomplete, is merely *externally* predicated of it (Castañeda 1989, Zalta 1983)
- Does (the *fictum*) Beatrice love (the *fictum*) Dante spiritually or erotically? Who knows. So, neither the property of *loving Dante spiritually* nor the property of *loving Dante erotically* constitutes her

Cont'd.

- So, unless they become stable, interpretations do not provide further properties to a *fictum*
- Hence, different unstable interpretations do not provide different *ficta*, but yield to one and the same *fictum* (the Ingardenian schema) externally predicated compatible properties of the form *being P according to interpretation I*
- One and the same *fictum* can indeed externally be both *P according to interpretation I* and *not-P according to interpretation I'*

Thank you!