

## **An ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction**

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*ABSTRACT. D. Matravers (2014) and D. Davies (2020) have explicitly articulated a prevailing consensus within the literature on fiction, positing that fiction’s definition must be based on the kind of reactions it induces rather than its ‘intrinsic’ characteristics, i.e. the properties that fictional tools, such as words or settings, assume before being conveyed to receivers. In contrast to this prevailing consensus, this work proposes an ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction. This characterisation asserts that a work is fiction if and only if there is a socially shared suspension of commitment to its representational role, and it is offered for interpretation. The aim of this study is to show that the proposed characterisation does not suffer from the limitations identified in other ‘intrinsic’ characterisations of fiction. It is further argued that this characterisation is a promising candidate for providing necessary and sufficient conditions for fiction.*

D. Matravers (2014) and D. Davies (2020) have made explicit a consensus claim in the literature on fiction: that it cannot be characterised in terms of its ‘intrinsic’ properties, i.e. the properties that fictional tools, such as words or settings, acquire before being conveyed to receivers. According to this view, fiction is generally taken to be definable only in terms of its functional properties, i.e. the responses it prescribes or elicits. Contrary to this, I propose an ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction: a characterisation according to which fiction is defined by the properties its tools assume before being presented to the audience. According to this characterisation, a work is fiction if and only if any commitment to its representational role is socially suspended and the work is offered for interpretation. My work aims to demonstrate

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that my characterisation does not suffer from the objections that have been raised against previous ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction and that it is a promising candidate for providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for fiction.

My work is organised as follows: first, I present the consensus view, highlighting the reasons given in support of it (§1), then I articulate the problematic assumption in the previous consensus view in order to present my new characterisation (§2), and finally I consider and reject objections to the necessary and sufficient conditions offered by the new characterisation of fiction (§3).

## 1. The Consensus View

D. Matravers has made explicit a consensus view, widely shared among philosophers, as follows:

The debate after Walton has crystallized around two points of consensus: that what it is for a proposition to be fictional is for there to be a mandate to imagine it and that the mental state of imagining a proposition can be given a functional definition that distinguishes it from believing that proposition. (Matravers, 2014, pp. 2-3)

D. Davies further explains the consensus view as follows:

Consensus on Matravers’ first claim was motivated by the belief that the fictionality of a literary, cinematic, or more broadly visual representation must be determined by the *kind of agency* from which it results rather than by any ‘*intrinsic*’ features it has. (Davies, 2022, p. 241)

It is therefore important first to understand why ‘intrinsic’ features<sup>2</sup> – i.e. the properties that fictional tools, such as words or settings, acquire before being conveyed to receivers – are considered inadequate for characterising fiction. So far, proposed ‘intrinsic’ characterisations have been concerned either (i) with the structural aspects of fiction (for linguistic fictions, these are the syntactic/stylistic properties) or (ii) with the aspects that enable fiction to represent (for linguistic fictions, these are the semantic properties).

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<sup>2</sup> The term “‘intrinsic’ features” is clearly taken from the above quotation. I will expand on the notion of ‘intrinsic’ at the end of §2.

It is not my concern here to defend a characterisation of fiction in terms of its structural/syntactic/stylistic properties (i.e. (i)): it is well known that even if there can be structural/syntactic/stylistic devices that are generally adopted within fiction, the same tools can be used outside fiction and, conversely, structural/syntactic/stylistic devices that are usually adopted outside fiction can be inserted into fiction without changing its fictional nature. Therefore, I will not examine these arguments in detail, because I agree with the reasons that have led to the exclusion of a structural/syntactic/stylistic characterisation of fiction.<sup>3</sup>

My aim is to challenge the way in which the above ‘intrinsic’ characterisations have been proposed in terms of representational (or semantic) properties (i.e. (ii)). More specifically, I do not challenge the rejection of previous semantic accounts themselves, but the assumptions on which those rejections rest. Before presenting my proposal, it is useful to consider why a characterisation of fiction in terms of its representational/semantic properties has been rejected.

Following D. Davies,<sup>4</sup> we can say that either (ii.a) fiction was thought to represent only the world of fiction, or (ii.b) fiction was thought to represent our world and to be false. Let us consider the two options separately to evaluate each of them.

The first option (i.e., ii.a) has been made explicit as follows:

In a work of fiction, it might be claimed, expressions in the narrative refer only inwardly, as elements in a self-enclosed linguistic universe. (Davies 2007, p. 34 my emphasis)

This proposal cannot be correct because we can find references to real cities, places, people, etc., in fiction. It is therefore unreasonable to assume that fiction refers to a “self-enclosed universe.”

The second option (i.e., ii.b) is characterised as follows:

Suppose we grant that language employed in fictional narratives performs *the same referential functions as language in non-fiction*, and that, in virtue of this, sentences in fictional

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<sup>3</sup> See Currie 1990, pp. 2-4, Davies 2007, pp. 33-34.

<sup>4</sup> Davies 2007 and 2022

works are, or may be, true or false of the world. It might still be suggested that the distinguishing feature of fictional works is that the sentences that make up the narrative are *false*. (Davies 2007, p. 35 my emphasis)

This proposal also fails because fiction is full of true and correct representations of reality; for example, historical fictions tend to be quite accurate in their representation of historical facts. And there is nothing wrong with assuming that fiction can be completely true; for example, an author may wish to report in fiction a complex series of events that she has witnessed.

I therefore agree that both (ii.a) and (ii.b) cannot provide an ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction in terms of representational/semantic properties. My objection concerns an assumption common to both of the above representational/semantic characterisations of fiction and largely left unquestioned in subsequent discussions, namely that fictional devices maintain representational/semantic properties both outside and inside fiction. In other words, it is assumed that fiction uses tools which have representational/semantic properties outside fiction, and that they maintain representational/semantic properties inside fiction, it is just debated whether they represent a self-enclosed universe or the actual world. I will argue instead that while fiction uses tools that have representational/semantic properties outside fiction, these semantic/representational properties are suspended inside fiction, leaving room for these tools to be interpreted as either representational or non-representational by participants in the practice of fiction.

## **2. A new ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction**

The proposal I am making is that fiction is characterised by tools that have a representational/semantic role outside of fiction, but that these tools are used within fiction with the social assumption that this role is suspended, leaving it open to interpretation whether or not to consider them as representational. To summarise and clarify what I am proposing, the ‘intrinsic’ definition of fiction offered here is as follows:

(F) A work is fiction if and only if any commitment to its representational role is socially suspended and the work is offered for interpretation

By "representational role" I do not mean merely semantic content or reference. I mean the socially recognised function of a representational device as committing its producer to using that device representationally. Fiction suspends precisely this commitment while leaving the representational resources themselves available for use.

By saying that commitment is socially suspended, I do not mean that authors or audiences cease to have beliefs about what is represented, nor that representational interpretation becomes impossible. Rather, I mean that participants in the practice are not socially expected to treat the representational role of the work as binding in the way they ordinarily do outside fiction.

It is now worth considering the 'intrinsic' characterisation of fiction I propose. The idea is that the tools of fiction have semantic, or more broadly representational, properties outside of fiction, but the ordinary commitment to their representational role is suspended. In the case of written or spoken texts, commitment to the truth is expected outside of fiction. This expectation is not merely psychological but normative: ordinary communicative practices entitle speakers and audiences to hold one another responsible for the representational commitments conveyed by their utterances. What I propose is that, within fiction, this commitment should be suspended. This does not mean that the text is false or, at most, accidentally true,<sup>5</sup> but rather that there is no commitment to truth or falsehood. The text takes on its own autonomy and the representational role it plays outside of fiction should not be taken for granted within it: it can be adopted, but an alternative interpretation of the means of expression used is also possible. The same applies to non-linguistic tools used in fiction, such as theatrical or film settings and actors. Here, the representational role cannot be taken for granted, and these features may be interpreted as either representational or expressive.

There are many advantages to adopting this proposal. One of the easiest aspects to observe is that when we approach fiction, we can focus our attention on the expressiveness of the means used, rather than on the object represented. The suspension of representational commitment is precisely what makes this interpretative engagement with the expressive dimensions of the work possible. For example, when we watch a classical ballet, we are interested in the expressive properties of the dance and the scenography. Some dance movements are interpreted as revealing states of mind, even if we don't think that those experiencing those states of mind

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5 For a defence of the idea that a work of fiction is, at most, accidentally true, see Currie (1990), pp.46ff.

would behave in that way. The leaps of a dancer that we interpret as being in love do not represent real leaps of the character, but are presented to the audience to capture the lightness and candid energy that the feeling provokes; the contortions of a dancer that we interpret as being desperate do not represent real contortions of the character, but are presented to us to be interpreted as revealing the character's state of mind. Even the scenography can reveal emotions even more than the situations in which the characters find themselves.

And we shouldn't think that these are the characteristics of ballet alone, but that they are the characteristics of all the fictional tools. In theatre and cinema, for example, we can interpret blurring not as a technical error, but as a tool to capture other elements such as memories, psychological unease, confusion, etc. Literary fiction is not without these characteristics either. For example, we can consider the writer's choice of words as revealing. The repetition of words, the use of long sentences, the use of unusually complex expressions can, depending on the fictional context, reveal the state of mind of the fictional author, the attitude of the character or the situation described.

In this way, I hope to have briefly presented some intuitive advantages for accepting this definition. The purpose of this work, however, is not to go into detail about the advantages of this characterisation of fiction, but rather to defend it against the objection that it does not provide sufficient or necessary conditions for fiction itself.

Before I consider them, it may be helpful to explain why I define my characterisation of fiction as 'intrinsic'. It could be argued that semantic properties are not intrinsic to words because they depend on how language is used. Similarly, it could be argued that other representational properties are not intrinsic to the objects or settings used, but rather constructions dependent on how they are used in society. I agree that semantic and representational properties are relational in that they are based on human usage. Furthermore, when I state that the representational properties of the tools used in fiction are socially suspended, I am clearly appealing to social conventions that are relational and not intrinsic to the fictional tools themselves. These conventions concern the normative expectations governing representational practices. Within fiction, participants no longer treat representational devices as carrying the ordinary commitments that regulate their use outside fiction. To clarify my terminology, it is helpful to point out that, in the context of fiction, I distinguish between: (a) the (socially constructed) properties with which the tools are presented to the audience, which I refer to as

‘intrinsic’ properties, and (b) the audience’s permitted or required reactions, which I refer to as ‘extrinsic’ or functional properties. The terminology used here is based on David Davies’s use of the term ‘intrinsic’, as outlined in the quotation at the beginning of §1.<sup>6</sup> The consensus view is that the ‘intrinsic’ properties of the tools of fiction remain constant both within and outside of fiction, whereas the distinctive characteristics of fiction only concern the ‘extrinsic’ or functional properties. Instead, I propose that the tools of fiction acquire specific ‘intrinsic’ properties that shape the ‘extrinsic’ or functional properties.

### **3. Objections to the Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for Fiction (with Replies)**

The above characterisation of fiction (F) provides necessary and sufficient conditions for fiction. I now consider some objections that might be raised to this definition. First, I consider some objections that aim to show that the definition does not provide sufficient conditions for fiction, and second, I then consider some objections that aim to show that the conditions provided are not necessary. The aim of this section is to defend my characterisation against the objections.

#### **3.1. Are the Conditions Provided not Sufficient for Fiction?**

The conditions offered as being both necessary and sufficient for a work to be considered fiction are as follows: any commitment to the work’s representational role is socially suspended, and the work is offered up for interpretation. This section will examine whether these conditions are sufficient by looking at alleged cases in which the same conditions are met outside of fiction.

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<sup>6</sup> As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, David Davies uses the term “‘intrinsic’ features” (Davies, 2022, p. 241). He writes that these features are characterised as either syntactic/structural or semantic/representational. I adopt his use of ‘intrinsic’ and interpret it as I have proposed. – Some colleagues objected to the use of the term ‘intrinsic’, for which I am very grateful. In response to these objections, I have added the above paragraph and this footnote, which I hope clarify my interpretation of it.

### **3.1.1. Actions without Representational Role**

There are cases in which our actions have no representational role. For example, when we produce sounds or words to clear our throat or to test a microphone, or when we do physical exercises. These are cases in which our actions have no representational role to begin with.

These cases are not counterexamples to my definition because they are not cases in which we offer something for interpretation, they have no communicative role. The distinguishing feature of fiction, according to this proposal, is that the work is offered for interpretation within the social convention that the representational role of its instruments is suspended.

### **3.1.2. Bullshit or Fake News**

Whoever expresses bullshit or fake news is not committed to any representational role. The bullshitters, like the producers of fake news, are – by definition – inattentive to any commitment to truth or falsehood, and their commitment (if there is one) is usually egoistic; for example, they may be pursuing their own personal interests, the interests of the society they work for, or they may be misanthropes.<sup>7</sup>

In these cases, it is worth distinguishing between the commitments undertaken by individual speakers and the representational commitments governing the social practice in which they participate. Unlike fiction, bullshit does not operate within a practice where representational commitments are suspended. Rather, it exploits the very existence of those commitments, since its success depends upon audiences continuing to interpret discourse according to the ordinary norms governing representation. Bullshit and fake news are usually socially condemned precisely because they violate a social commitment to a certain way of interpreting the representational role of discourse, i.e. the commitment to truth. Therefore, the bullshitter and the producer of fake news do not operate within a social suspension of the commitment to truth.

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<sup>7</sup> See Frankfurt 2005 on bullshit and Grieve and Woodfield 2023 for fake news.

It might be objected that at least sometimes, for example in pubs, a small group of people might agree to talk bullshit.<sup>8</sup> In that case, and this is the objection, the small group of people is socially accepting of the suspension of the commitment to truth. This is still a case that would be socially (in the sense of the larger society) condemned, but it would be condemned not only because of the lack of commitment to truth, but also because of its uselessness in communication. The people in the pub may find it funny, but their agreement does not establish the social suspension of representational commitment that characterises fiction.

### **3.1.3. Humour and Irony**

It may be observed that people sometimes suspend their commitment to truth when they engage in humour and/or irony. It may therefore be objected that the above conditions apply to humour and irony as well, and not just to fiction.

To answer this objection, it is useful to note that humour and irony are not always uncommitted to the truth; there are cases where humourists or ironists are definitely so committed, for example when they report what a politician has said or implicated, or when they imitate his attitude, or when they make fun of people's common habits.<sup>9</sup> It is clear, then, that humour and irony can be used both inside and outside fiction; when used inside fiction, they are not bound to any representational role in our society and are open to interpretation. But this is not a characteristic of humour or irony, it is a characteristic of fiction.

### **3.1.4. Refusal to Stick to Any Social Commitment**

It may be objected that there are cases where speakers wish to avoid any obligation to take responsibility for what they say or do. For example, a speaker might say: 'P, but I do not want to be held responsible for saying P, and I will deny that I ever said P'.

While we may doubt whether such linguistic performance is sufficient to avoid responsibility, even if speakers succeed, they must perform an explicit act of denial, demonstrating their

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<sup>8</sup> This objection was raised with me at a conference in Paris. I would like to thank the person who raised it for drawing my attention to it.

<sup>9</sup> See Carroll 2014 for humour and Sperber and Wilson 2012 for an introduction to the debate on irony.

control and intention to evade responsibility. This once again demonstrates that commitment to the representational role of language is paramount outside of fiction.

### **3.1.5. Reporting Dreams or Hypotheses**

Sometimes, people report the content of their dreams or formulate hypotheses about events. In these cases, it can be observed that the speakers are not committed to the truth of either their dream content or their hypotheses. They usually share such information for the purpose of interpretation (e.g. the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams) or evaluation (e.g. testing the veracity of hypotheses).

I agree that in these cases the commitment to truth is not complete, but even in these cases there is some such commitment. For example, the dream-reporter is not committed to the truth of what she dreamt, but she is at least committed to the truth that she really dreamt it; and the hypothesis-raiser is not committed to the truth of the hypothesis, but she is at least committed to the plausibility of the hypothesis, i.e. to the truth of the consequences of such a hypothesis. I conclude, therefore, that even in these cases there is a specific commitment to the truth (i.e., a specific representational role) that is suspended within fiction.

### **3.2. Are the Conditions Provided not Necessary for Fiction?**

It may be objected that, even if the social suspension of the representational role of the fictional instruments and their being offered for interpretation are in themselves sufficient for fiction, they are not necessary. According to these objections, there may be cases of fiction in which these conditions are not met. I will consider the objections and explain why, in my view, such conditions cannot be avoided in fiction.

### 3.2.1. Assertions within Fictions

It may be objected that fictional authors include assertions within fictions, and that therefore fiction itself is partially committed to truth. As an example, consider the very beginning of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*:

All happy families are alike, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Tolstoy (1877) [Eng. tr.: p. 3])

My answer to this objection is not simple because philosophical literature does not provide a uniform interpretation of these alleged assertions in fiction. I want my proposal to remain neutral with respect to these different interpretations. The three main interpretations of these alleged assertions are:

- (1) they are assertions, the authors express their own view of the real world with them;<sup>10</sup>
- (2) they are not assertions, the authors only provide information about the fictional world they describe;<sup>11</sup>
- (3) they are hybrid, the authors provide statements that are both fictional and asserted.<sup>12</sup>

My claim is that whichever interpretation is given to these alleged assertions, my definition is still an adequate one. If the first interpretation is accepted (i.e. (1)), then they are real assertions and not fiction. This shows that they are not a counterexample to my proposal, since they are not fiction.

If we assume instead that they are not assertions (i.e. (2)), then my definition is not challenged, as they do not have the commitments they would have outside fiction. Under this interpretation, they are fiction, so there is no commitment to them being true.

If, however, we assume that they are hybrids or ambiguous between the fictional and the non-fictional (i.e. (3)), then my definition concerns their fictional content, not their non-fictional

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10 Searle 1975, Currie 1990, Lamarque and Olsen 1996, Deutch 2000, Abell 2020

11 Beardsley 1981, van Inwagen 1977, Kripke 2011, Mahon 2019, Marsili 2023, Stokke 2023

12 Friend 2008, García-Carpintero 2013, allegedly Stock 2017, Abell 2020, Bergman and Franzén 2022

content. Once again, this interpretation, which assumes a dual content to certain fictional statements, does not challenge my proposal, which concerns only their fictional content.

### **3.2.2. Historical or biographical fictions**

It may be objected that historical or biographical fiction is committed to truth, i.e. to the truth of historical facts or the truth of biographical facts. It might be argued, therefore, that it is socially acceptable for these commitments to be respected within fiction, thereby abandoning any suspension of the representational role of fiction.

To answer this possible counterexample, a simple thought experiment may be useful. Suppose someone accuses the author of a work of fiction of defamation of a person or of ideological interpretation of historical facts. The author can honestly defend herself by stating that the work is fiction and that she is free to take any creative licence she wishes, including offering her own interpretation or deformation of biographical or historical facts. This defence is available precisely because participation in the practice of fiction suspends the ordinary representational commitments that would otherwise govern the same representational devices. This shows that historical or biographical fiction is not committed to a specific representational role — namely, truth — and is therefore not a counterexample to my definition.

## **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me summarise this work. According to the prevailing consensus view, the defining feature of fiction should not be sought in syntactic or structural properties, nor in semantic or representational properties. These are considered ‘intrinsic’ properties, acquired by fictional tools prior to presentation to the audience and pertaining to the tools independently of reception. The same consensus holds that the distinctive characteristic of fiction lies in the way it is normatively received, i.e. through imagination, pretence, or make-believe. The idea is that fiction is characterised functionally, through the attitude induced in the audience towards the content conveyed.

My proposal is that fictional tools do not have the same semantic or representational properties they have outside fiction. Within fiction, the ordinary commitment to the representational role of these tools is socially suspended. This leaves the audience free to interpret the tools either representationally or expressively. I am therefore proposing an ‘intrinsic’ characterisation of fiction, defining it in terms of properties that are socially acquired prior to presentation to the audience.

My proposal has many advantages as it can explain many interpretations of fiction that the traditional consensus view struggles to explain. However, the main objective of this brief piece is not to demonstrate the implications of the proposal; rather, it is to refute some straightforward and readily apparent objections to it. These objections are intended to demonstrate that the characterisation of fiction that I propose is neither sufficient nor necessary for fiction. My main objective has been to address these objections and defend my definition of fiction against them. If successful, the present proposal suggests that the defining feature of fiction lies not primarily in the responses it elicits from audiences, but in the distinctive social status assigned to its representational tools.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This work has been presented at various stages of development and in different forms in Turin (MUMBLE Research Seminar and SIFA Conference), Barcelona (BW12), online (II International Colloquium on the Metaphysics and Semantics of Fiction and MITE Research Seminar), Bologna (Workshop on Fiction, Reality and Communication), Paris (Workshop: The Limits of Fiction), Athens (ESA25) and Glasgow (Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and Mind Association). I would like to thank everyone who contributed to my presentations with objections and questions. - This research was funded by the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” of the University of Milan under the Project “Departments of Excellence 2023-2027”, under the Project PRIN 2022 (Project Code 2022NTCHYF\_003) and under the Project PRIN 2022 PNRR (Project Code P20225A73K\_003), all awarded by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR).

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