[*Expositions* 11.2 (2017) 34–56] *Expositions* (online) ISSN: 1747–5376

Pleading the Case:
Paying Attention to Works of Fiction as well as Fictional Worlds

ERIK SCHMIDT
Gonzaga University

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that philosophical literary criticism should take questions about medium, genre, and form more seriously. Section one distinguishes between works of fiction and the fictional worlds they realize. Section two explains why philosophers should pay more attention to the features of a work of fiction that enable it to realize a fictional world. Section three uses Shakespeare's Othello *to illustrate how one formal feature of a work, dramatic irony, can be philosophically important.*

> "And we would allow her advocates who are not poets but lovers of poetry to plead her case in prose without meter, and show that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of man. And we shall listen benevolently, for it will be clear gain for us if it can be shown that she bestows not only pleasure but benefit.
>
> Plato, *Republic* (607d–607e)

Introduction

Fiction plays an important role in philosophy. To see this, we only need to think of such prominent thought experiments as John Searle's story about an isolated person translating Chinese characters, Frank Jackson's story about a color-blind color scientist, or Judith Jarvis Thompson's story about awakening to find yourself surgically connected to a violinist in renal failure. These stories, and others like them, figure prominently in a wide range of philosophical efforts to develop counterexamples, illustrate complex concepts, and establish various modal claims.[1]

Fiction also makes an appearance in philosophy in other ways. For example, metaphors play a fundamental role in the way our minds work, generating a range of conceptual entailments that organize our thoughts and experiences.[2] We might think here, for example, of metaphors like space as a container, the blank slate, the architecture of knowledge, mind as a machine, or even the various military metaphors that shape the assessment of arguments across many philosophical debates. Such metaphors show us that a basic fictional device plays an important role in any philosophical effort to articulate and defend a position.

The recognition that fiction plays an important role in philosophy motivates some philosophers to cross disciplinary boundaries and engage in an activity best described as a form of philosophical literary criticism, a practice that explores a range of philosophical questions raised by various works of fiction. This raises a basic question: Should philosophers approach works of fiction (e.g., novels, plays, paintings, or films) in a way that differs from how they might approach the simpler stories and thought experiments found in a philosophical text? Few philosophers deny that the literary qualities of many works of fiction make them compelling and enjoyable, but are concerns about medium, genre, and form worthy of any special philosophical attention? How far across the disciplinary boundary separating philosophy from English should philosophers be willing to go?

In this essay, I defend the claim that philosophers should approach works of fiction in a way that differs from how they approach the counterexamples, illustrations, and thought experiments found in philosophy because concerns about medium, genre, and form are relevant to the philosophical discussion of many works of fiction. I defend that claim in three steps. First, I distinguish between attending to a work of fiction and attending to the fictional world it realizes and I outline how that distinction fits into contemporary debates concerning the cognitive value of fiction. Next, I offer a general argument for why it is important for philosophical literary critics to attend to the manner or way that a work of fiction realizes a fictional world. Finally, I turn to Shakespeare's *Othello* to offer one example of what this might look like. Overall, I hope to defend the philosophical value of attending to the features of the works that enable us to experience various fictional worlds. I hope, in the words of Plato's *Republic*, to plead the case that some works of fiction are not only delightful, but philosophically useful.

1. Works of Fiction vs. Fictional Worlds

In addition to using well-bounded counterexamples, illustrations, and thought experiments, many philosophers refer to works of literary fiction in their work.[3] This tendency is not surprising. It is natural for philosophers who love novels, plays, dramas, and films to engage their favorite works from a philosophical perspective. In the 1980s, however, many Anglo-American philosophers began to use works of fiction not only to illustrate or motivate various philosophical positions or claims but to do philosophy.[4] This move was noted by Arthur Danto in his 1984 address to the American Philosophical Association.[5] Danto pointed out that in addition to philosophical reflections on literature as a practice (philosophy *of* literature) and a recognition that philosophical writing counts as a form of literature (philosophy *as* literature), philosophers now recognize the philosophical significance of literature (philosophy *and* literature).

Anthony Quinton identified a similar trend in British philosophy in an address he gave to commemorate the opening of the Center for Philosophy and Literature at the University of Warwick in 1985.[6] In his talk, Quinton advocated not only the exploration of philosophy as literature, but also the exploration of philosophy as it is found in literature. He pointed to the wide range of philosophical material found within works of imaginative literature and suggested that while this content is often latent or imbedded in a work, it can be clearly discerned by "a process that goes beyond a straightforward reading."[7]

I will call this activity of doing philosophy by engaging a work of fiction philosophical literary criticism or PLC for short. PLC rose to prominence in Anglo-American philosophy during the 1980s through Martha Nussbaum's discussion of the insights we gain from a philosophical reading of Henry James and Stanley Cavell's discussion of skepticism in seven Shakespeare plays.[8]

This rise coincided with several prominent critiques of modern ethical theory and, in many cases, those two trends joined forces. Bernard Williams, for example, criticized moral theorists for regarding ethical conflicts as a conflict of beliefs that can be resolved through the application of rational principles, rather than conflicts of desire which are not easily resolved and often leave room for legitimate forms of regret.[9] As a result, Williams argued that we can face tragic dilemmas where we cannot fully meet the demands of two or more conflicting requirements. Philosophy, he suggested, should therefore attend to the emotional fabric of human life rather than consistent sets of universal principles. This suggestion motivated some philosophers to focus on the way works

of works of fiction can direct our attention to ethically relevant features of our lives and the conflicts found within them. That move, reinforced by a subsequent rise of work on virtue ethics, moral particularism, and human emotion, remains one driving force behind ethically-oriented PLC today.

PLC is alive and well in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. It ranges from Simon Critchley and Colin McGinn, who offer philosophical readings of Shakespeare,[10] to the large number of books found in the Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture series, including such volumes as *House of Cards and Philosophy: Underwood's Republic* and *Downton Abbey and Philosophy: The Truth Is Neither Here Nor There*. Admittedly, many efforts to engage popular culture from a philosophical perspective are best seen as efforts to motivate or introduce various skills of philosophical reflection to students and the broader culture by connecting philosophy to something people already enjoy. Other instances of PLC, however, attempt to do original philosophical work. My argument here will focus on the latter.

In this section I want to draw attention to the tendency of PLC to focus almost exclusively on the fictional worlds that are realized through various works of fiction. I want to highlight the way critics focus on the characters, events, and environments found in the fictional world that a work of fiction realizes and tend to ignore various literary or formal devices that enable a work of fiction to realize that world. I want to suggest that this is an important oversight and that philosophical critics should pay attention to the works of fiction they engage and not simply the fictional worlds those works realize.

We can clarify that distinction between a work of fiction and the fictional world it realizes by defining a work of fiction as a particular realization of a text.[11] A work of fiction, on this account, is a text that has been produced or instantiated by being written, sung, spoken, performed, or even just simply entertained. One text can be realized by multiple works. This can be done in a variety of ways, using a wide range of media and formal devices. One can realize the text of *Hamlet*, for example, with finger puppets or through animation or as a picture book just as well as through a staged performance or an edited edition of the play. All those works can, within reasonable limits, count as instances of *Hamlet* since each one realizes the text by instantiating it in the world.

The relationship between a text and work, on this account, is the relationship between a type and a token.[12] A text counts as a unique abstract object or type that can be tokened or realized in concrete form as a performance, book, or utterance. Printed books in different languages, times,

or locations count as tokens of the abstract type of a given text in the same way that staged performances count as tokens of a text. The common English tendency to treat the terms ‘text’ and ‘book’ as interchangeable would be a mistake on the account I adopt here. According to this account, any concrete object or event in the world that tokens the abstract type of a given text counts as a work. Individual books and dramatic performances are equally works of fiction since each one is a token of some text. As Shakespeare famously reminds us in Sonnet 55,[13] this relationship between token and type is partly responsible for the enduring power of literary fiction. The need to actualize a text in the world is one source of its durability. It renders texts nearly indestructible because they are so easily reproduced.

We can define a fictional world, along these lines, as the imagined space occupied by the characters, actions, and settings specified by the content of a text and realized through a work of fiction. It is the world we enter through our imaginative engagement with a work. This distinction between a text and a work enables me to state my concern precisely: PLC tends to ignore the token-specific properties of the works of fiction it explores in exchange for a focus on the fictional worlds specified by the texts that are realized through those works.

As tokens, works of fiction have many properties that are not properties of the texts they realize. These include the token-specific properties that enable a work to realize the abstract type of a text. The literary qualities of a manuscript or the dramatic qualities of a performance would be examples of such token-specific properties of a work. Some of these token-specific properties, like font, line spacing, or paper weight, will usually be unrelated to the contents of the fictional world a work realizes while other properties, like personification, metaphor, and poetic form, may be crucial to the shape or character of that fictional world.[14]

By ignoring or setting aside those token-specific properties of a work of fiction, PLC takes the fictional worlds they realize at face value, treating them as proxies for the actual world. Philosophical critics may not fail to appreciate such things as Shakespeare’s sophisticated use of poetic form, but such literary features tend not to figure into efforts to show what philosophers can learn from fiction. PLC tends to ignore questions related to medium, genre, and form to focus more carefully on the characters and events found in various fictional worlds.

I won’t deny that this is a reasonable strategy. Like thought experiments, fiction offers up discrete characters and events that have been modified at will through a creative process. They allow us to suspend seemingly universal or unchanging requirements and assumptions, while

holding others fixed in a way that, like the hypotheticals frequently found in legal reasoning, provides the widest possible application or scope to the concepts and assumptions that shape our intuitions and thought. Fiction enables us to engage worlds that are inherently subjunctive and flexible, allowing us to bring real intuitions and commitments to bear on worlds that are not limited by the constraints of perfect realism. But unlike the thought experiments of philosophy, fiction does this through well-crafted stories of compelling characters and events. So why not use works of fiction in similar ways, but to greater effect?

Most versions of PLC follow this model, which we can see clearly in the approaches taken by four prominent Anglo-American philosophers who defend PLC. Martha Nussbaum approaches PLC from a broadly Aristotelian perspective, suggesting that by engaging the lives of fictional characters we hone our empathic imagination in ways that can be transferred to the real or actual world.[15] Gregory Curry approaches PLC from the perspective of empirical psychology, claiming that fiction enables us to project ourselves into complex simulated situations, which refines our creative imagination and our ability to test and revise a wide range of values in light of their consequences within those imagined situations.[16] Noël Carroll argues that works of fiction can draw on our latent memories, emotions, intuitions, and other resources we bring to our encounter with the fictional world created through a work of fiction and those can resources provide a *maieutic* argument in favor of various theses suggested by the work.[17] Peter Kivy, finally, argues that literary texts do not provide support for the thematic statements or claims they propose to a reader directly. Rather, the evidence they provide is found in the way our experience of a work of fiction involves an extended engagement with both the fictional world that we experience through a work as well as our experience of the actual world that we inhabit as a reader. He argues that we test a theme or claim against a wide range of experiences, both those we experience imaginatively through our encounter with literature as well as those we have in the actual world, while reading or reflecting on a text.[18]

But we might wonder, what can we learn by engaging a work of fiction rather than the fictional world it realizes? What kind of philosophical work can be done by paying attention to things such as characterization, plot, or perspective? In the next section I explain why I think it is important for philosophers to focus on works of fiction as well as fictional worlds.

2. Why Philosophical Critics Should Attend to Literary Features of Works of Fiction

One motivation to focus on token-specific features of a work of fiction is to ensure that PLC offers a distinctive way of doing philosophy and not simply a more interesting or aesthetically pleasing context in which to do it. It is helpful to situate this suggestion within the context of two enduring criticisms of the claim that PLC counts as a distinct philosophical practice.

The first challenge is to show how the philosophical insights PLC attributes to a work of literature connect to that work.[19] If PLC cannot show how the insights it discovers can be based on features of the work it explores then it fails to show that work's philosophical value. Without a clear connection between an insight and a work, the work of fiction becomes essentially dispensable. It is neither necessary nor sufficient to bring about the insight. It is not sufficient since something other than the work was needed to derive the insight and it is not necessary since it is not clear why someone might not arrive at the same insight independent of some engagement with that work. The work of fiction becomes, in an important sense, coincidental to the insight that the philosophical critic associates with it. It plays an autobiographical role, describing how a critic came to a given view. This makes it hard to see how the work could play a philosophical role, explaining how it might generate or support a philosophical insight. The act of PLC, on this model, looks less like an act of interpretation than an act of paraphrase, where some theme found in a literary text is rendered into a philosophical proposition that is offered up for independent, or non-literary, examination.[20]

One way to respond to this concern is to connect PLC's philosophical insights to features of the work of fiction under consideration and not simply the fictional world that work realizes. This response, however, immediately raises a second concern. Does a connection between the token-specific features of a work and the insights gained through PLC provide us with a reason for thinking those insights are true? Does it connect the insights to the work in the right way or in a way that is relevant to the work of philosophy?

One important source for this second concern is that fiction does not make claims about reality.[21] The point here is not to deny that the contents of a work of fiction can resemble the actual world or that works of fiction do not draw on a reader's background knowledge of states of affairs about the world. They decidedly do. A work of fiction that made no appeal whatsoever to the world we inhabit as readers or audience would be nearly incoherent. Fiction inevitably draws on a wide

range of background experience and knowledge and many authors work hard to ensure that even the smallest details they include are factually accurate.[22]

Nevertheless, this does not show that works of fiction *refer* to the world since resemblance does not entail reference. It is true that some cases of depiction involve reference through resemblance, but that does not show us that resemblance is either equivalent to reference or able to establish it on its own. The easiest way to see this is that resemblance is symmetrical (if Sally resembles Mary than the reverse is also true) while reference is not (if the name "Sally" refers to some person Sally, that person does not also refer to her name). Similarly, resemblance is not enough to establish a reference or else twins would refer to each other and forgeries would refer to the objects they resemble rather than fake them.

To put this point about the relationship between resemblance and reference in more literary terms, the fact that the fictional world realized by a work of fiction resembles the world we live in does not entail that that work should be viewed as an instance of literary realism just as the fact that some of the events depicted through a work resemble features of an author's life does not entail that a work of fiction is autobiographical. This point is often neglected by the tendency of many philosophers to treat all works of literature as instances of literary realism.[23]

Simply put, the common philosophical concern about whether fiction can provide us with a reason for thinking that a claim about the world is true may be the wrong question to ask about most works of fiction. After all, the point of a work of fiction is to produce an experience, not a belief. Its defining goal is to enable a reader or viewer to experience a fictional world. Fictional worlds are clearly similar in many respects to the world we inhabit as readers or viewers but that similarity does not automatically make them descriptions of our world.

I am not denying that some fictions are intended to be didactic or to communicate some lesson or claim. What I am pointing out is that even in those cases, the goal of such a work, *as a work of fiction,* is to produce an experience, regardless of how that experience might be subsequently used or even intended to be used. Writing fiction, in other words, is always an act of creation. An author provides us with a written work that enables us to experience a fictional world that is unique, individual, and separate from the actual world we inhabit as a reader or audience.

That act of creation is also present in the act of engaging a work of fiction as a reader or viewer. Stories are incomplete by their very nature.[24] That incompleteness stems from events the author inevitably leaves out. (How many children did Lady Macbeth nurse? How does Isabella respond

to the Duke's marriage proposal at the end of *Measure for Measure*?) It also includes important features of a character's psychology. (How has Volumnia shaped Coriolanus, as his mother?) It can even extend to the meaning of a given line of dialogue. (At the end of *Taming of Shrew*, is Katherine's response sarcastic, showing she will never be tamed, ironic, making fun of Petruccio in front of his friends, a con, colluding with Petruccio to take his friends' bet, or an indication she now sees her marriage as a flawed, though stable, contract?)

As Janine Utell puts this important point about the act of creating a story-world, "Gap-filling is seen to be a creative process, and literary texts call upon their readers to embrace a certain level of difficulty and complexity, to reject the superficial or straightforward. The gaps and how to 'repair' them should not be clean and apparent; that is what enriches a narrative and our experience of it."[25] The act of reading, in this way, is an act of creating that draws on features of the world a reader inhabits as well as patterns in the ways a reader views the significance of those features, which is partly why fictional worlds come to resemble the worlds we inhabit as viewers and readers. But we must remember that resemblance, no matter how interesting or powerful, is not the same as reference and so the creative acts of writing and reading are not best understood to count as acts of description. As Samuel Johnson puts this in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind."[26]

This raises a final concern for many philosophers. If works of fiction aren't in the game of generating beliefs about the world, how can PLC tie a philosophical insight to a work of fiction in a truth-relevant way?

The answer, I would suggest, is that while works of fiction are not, strictly speaking, either true or false, they can be plausible when they conform to the principles of probability and necessity. Fiction, to draw on the Greek concept of *hypotyposis*, aspires to create something that is alive to a reader or viewer. So focusing on the features of a work of fiction that make something plausible [*eikos*] or alive can be philosophically relevant. Liveliness rather than truth may be the relevant force behind PLC.

To see why, we might notice that some works of fiction explore how various concepts at the heart of our lives (e.g., identity, agency, forgiveness, and commitment) work their way through the various determining conditions (e.g., language, gender, class, and education) that give those concepts their shape and importance. What may be important, therefore, is not just what a work

says about those concepts but how a work presents that content. What enables us to recognize the concepts that are in play in that work and what do the conditions that enable us to recognize them reveal about the role they play in our lives or the lives of people around us?

It is important, in other words, to see that the insights PLC can provide into certain issues can go beyond showing how certain constructions of those concepts might be possible. Fiction can do more than point us in the direction of a circumstance or event that establishes some sort of modal claim about the world. Works of fiction, we might say, are no more in the game of confirmation than they are in the game of reference. They are oriented by the goal of recognition. So, when it comes to concepts such as identity, agency, forgiveness, and commitment, a work of fiction can reveal some of the ways in which those concepts are shaped or determined by a wide range of personal and social conditions and those revelations can be important to philosophers.

This elevates works of fiction beyond mere thought experiments and provides one reason why PLC may require us to do more than imagine the contents of a fictional world. If the goal of fiction is simply to direct us toward a possibility that would confirm a modal claim, then we would only need to focus on the content of the fictional world that a work realizes. If we are interested in the further question of plausibility or in questions about such things as the determining conditions for various ethically and socially important concepts, we will need to look at the conditions that shape those concepts in the work we are criticizing. We will need to identify, in other words, the features of the work that enable us to recognize the plausibility of the way a given concept accounts what we experience as a reader or audience.

When philosophical critics engage a work of fiction, therefore, they have reason to focus on that work and not simply the fictional world it realizes, since a philosophical exploration of some concepts through a work of literature will require careful attention to the features of the work that are responsible for our recognition of the conceptual issues it raises. For example, the features of a work of fiction that condition our experience of certain concepts, such as identity, agency, forgiveness, and commitment, may well point us to similar forms of conditioning or conceptual shaping in the world.[27] The work of fiction may not refer to those conditions in the world but the work will do more than confirm their possibility. Focusing on how certain conditions function within a work of fiction, therefore, can help us recognize how similar features of the world condition or shape a range of important concepts that characterize our lives.

This argument points back to Aristotle's famous discussion in the *Poetics* of the contrast between Homeric epics and history. Aristotle writes, "It is not the poet's function to relate actual events, but the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability or necessity."[28] Fiction describes events that can be credibly imagined. Something can succeed as fiction, therefore, even if it is physically impossible. We might think here, for example, of nearly any instance of magical realism, where we encounter such fitting yet bizarre events as Frances, in Sarah Ruhl's *Melacholy Play: A Contemporary Farce*, being transformed into an almond. We must be convinced as an audience that the events the fiction describes can be plausibly imagined.

This also brings us back to Plato, a famous critic of dramatic poetry. As Glenn Most, Nikos Charalabopoulos, and other contemporary scholars point out, Plato was not a critic of fiction but a critic of the unthinking way in which fiction tends to be consumed by cultures that fail to be oriented by a love of truth.[29] He was a critic of lying or misleading myths [*pseudomythos*]. He rejects the use of the attractive or persuasive properties of myth to seduce people to win an argument. But when a myth is situated within the context of a philosophical pursuit of truth, Plato was willing not only to endorse the use of fiction as part of philosophical inquiry, he was willing to use it himself.

What is important for my thesis is that what distinguishes likely myths [*eikos mythos*] from lying myths [*pseudo mythos*] in Plato's dialogues is their form. What makes a myth likely [*eikos*] is the way it is told. Its parts must be alive [*hypotyposis*]. It must be a microcosm of the world it reveals and the story must be told in the context of a conversation oriented by a love of truth. All three of those conditions come together clearly, for example, in the eschatological myths of the *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*. The way those myths are told enables them to provoke us as philosophers and to support a relationship to fiction that can be characterized as a living tension rather than a purely sophistical competition or contest [*agon*].

All of this suggests that PLC may need to approach works of fiction in ways that differ from the counterexamples, illustrations, and thought experiments we find throughout philosophy since the features of a work of fiction that enable it to realize the fictional world specified by a text may be philosophically important. In such cases, it will be important for PLC to focus on token-specific properties of a work and not simply on the contents of the fictional world that work realizes. It may sometimes be important, in other words, for PLC to attend to questions about such things as medium, genre, and form. In the final section of this paper I will illustrate how that might work by

offering account of how Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony in *Othello* reveals an insight into the conditions that shape our vulnerability to deception.

3. A Case Study: Othello, Deception, and Dramatic Irony

Dramatic irony, where the audience knows more than the characters onstage, is a central dramatic device across multiple Shakespeare plays. He uses it for comic effect in such plays as *The Comedy of Errors*, where the audience is aware of the presence of two sets of twins who were separated at birth, and to enhance pathos in plays like *Much Ado about Nothing*, where only certain characters onstage and the audience know the full backstory to the events surrounding Claudio's shaming of Hero at the altar. Indeed, when we look at the development of Shakespeare's plays, spanning the early and mature comedies through the problem plays and romances, we find a consistent development of increasingly sophisticated ways he uses dramatic irony to control a range of other important features of his plays.

How does this relate to PLC? Its relevance can be found in the substantive role dramatic irony plays in characterization, plots that turn on the vulnerability of relationships of trust, and several other philosophically relevant features that shape our experience of the plays. For example, dramatic irony provides an explanation for the gradual moral darkening of Shakespeare's comedies. In the comedies, we find at least three rough levels of knowledge or understanding, ranging from comic characters, such as Dogberry, Malvolio, and Bottom, who have little contextual knowledge or awareness, to romantic heroes, such as Benedick, Orlando, and Orsino, who have a partial awareness of what is going on around them, and finally, heroines, such as Portia, Rosalind, and Helena, who have nearly full contextual knowledge or awareness. One way to capture the increasing darkness of the later comedies and romances, therefore, is to track a hero or heroine's ability in each play to control the action of the play through superior knowledge. As we move into the late plays, like *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, we increasingly find heroes who are unable to fully grasp or control the action of the play and we see final comedic resolutions that are more dependent on some magical power or a character with an awareness that rises well above the audience's. The world onstage becomes darker because, in an important sense, it has become more tragic. The characters find themselves increasingly vulnerable to a world in which the primary forces that determine their fates are increasingly beyond their understanding or control.

Noticing this trend and the importance of dramatic irony enables a philosophical critic looking at *Othello* to think more carefully about the role differences of knowledge play in human relations and the role they play in human vulnerability. Shakespeare uses at least three theatrical devices to enhance the force of dramatic irony in *Othello*, devices that different productions highlight in different ways. Each device heightens an audience member's sense of anxiety and displacement in ways that enables them to more clearly experience their vulnerability to deception.

First, Shakespeare introduces the racial tension of a sexual relationship between a black Moor and a white Venetian. The political dimensions of that tension, as evidenced by the long history of controversy over the play's performance, has unsettled audiences for generations. Second, Shakespeare leaves the audience without any comic subplot, which grants the audience little relief from the building tension. Third, he deprives the audience of any onstage confidant. There is no Horatio or Macduff to partially embody the audience's perspective onstage. Even Iago's soliloquy at the end of the first act undermines any chance at confidence. Unlike most soliloquies in Shakespeare, where the audience is drawn into a character's honest act of choice,[30] Iago is indifferent to the actual source of his motivation. His soliloquy reveals what Coleridge famously calls "the motive-hunting of [Iago's] motiveless malignity." He confides what he will do but not why, which prevents him from becoming a confidant or confessant through his soliloquy.

All three dramatic devices are important because they heighten an audience member's experience of the fragility of Iago's trap, which include the flimsy pretexts of a handkerchief and an overheard conversation. One word from any one of several characters would reveal Iago's ruse. The dramatic power of the play turns largely on simple questions that are not asked and simple things that are not said. Each audience member becomes a silent physical witness to the fragile string of events that undo Othello.

This anxiety is reinforced by Shakespeare's fourth dramatic device, the use of nested audiences. For example, in the key scene where Iago traps Othello into demoting Roderigo, there are three audiences onstage, each with differing levels of knowledge about what happened. The audience experiences the vulnerability created by asymmetries of knowledge unfold in front of them in part because they witness several characters gradually become aware of that same vulnerability in themselves.

All of this brings out a dramatic feature of deception that we might otherwise overlook. As Bernard Williams points out, most philosophical accounts of deception rest on what is said or on

what he calls the "fetishizing of assertion."[31] In a traditional case of deception, a person who is deceived assumes that the sincerity of a speaker is a reliable indicator that the speaker intends the listener to accept the content of the stated proposition as true because the listener trusts that the speaker's belief in the truth of the statement is a source of his or her motivation to speak. The central example of deception, on such an account, is an explicit falsehood presented as the truth.

In *Othello,* we see a different form of deception. What Iago says is generally not explicitly false but suggestive, incomplete, or misleading. The faulty beliefs that results from Iago's plan do not involve false descriptive propositions as much as inapt characterizations or interpretations of the meaning or significance of what someone sees or hears. This undermines Othello's autonomy not by severing the person who has been deceived from the world through false belief but through a distorted picture of the world. Those distortions are achieved through prompted acts of imagination[32] as well as telling an explicit truth but not the whole story. It depends on Iago's being able to work with whatever interpretation Othello arrives at in each case, which leaves Othello vulnerable to the illusion that he controls the outcome. Iago is, in an important sense, more street magician than mastermind.

This reading of *Othello* diverges from the well-known readings offered by Stanley Cavell and Tzachi Zamir.[33] Following Jacques Lacan, both philosophers emphasize what they see as Othello's pathological willingness to be deceived. For Cavell, Othello's willingness is rooted in his need to deny his own finitude as a man in the face of Desdemona's sexual desire while for Zamir it is rooted in his excessive need to maintain a heroic and pure self-image. I am arguing, in contrast, that the fragility of Iago's ruse pushes us not to recognize some underlying pathological willingness on Othello's part but rather a more general vulnerability to the conditions of trust that make communication possible.

The play reveals the double vulnerability of any listener. We can be deceived by statements that are explicitly false but stated in a way that the speaker's motivation appears to be her belief that the statement is true. But we can also be deceived by statements that are true as descriptions but are put forward in a way that distorts our interpretation of the significance or meaning of the facts they describe. It preys on the way all listeners, like all readers, must fill in various gaps in what has been said through a creative act of interpretation. This second sort of deception arises most clearly in cases like Iago's manipulations, where the act someone performs through some statement differs from the act suggested by the content of that statement. The split in this second

case is not between the speaker's statement and the world but between the content of a statement and what the speaker is trying to do through that statement.

Two simple examples from the play are Iago's common references to assurance and certainty which serves to reinforce Othello's doubt and Iago's consistent use of apparent restraint. He claims, for example, that he would rather have his tongue ripped out of his mouth than to implicate Cassio (2.3.221–222), but that statement itself does much of the work to condemn him, since Othello now assumes that any gaps in the information Iago presents would only further indict Cassio.

To get a handle on this second type of deception we need to clearly distinguish between the content of what someone says and the act he or she performs through their statement. It is fundamentally a performance, a performance that fails to pay the same respect to the truth as an outright lie. So, there is something we miss if we fail to see the distinction between the two modes of deception that become clear once we attend to the specific ways in which Shakespeare uses dramatic irony to enhance the dramatic tension of *Othello.* Paying attention to the dramatic features of the play reveals something important about a variety of deception that is inherently dramatic in character and the features of the play that heighten an audience's experience of Othello's vulnerability to Iago points directly at similar conditions that shape our vulnerability to similar sorts of deception in the world.[34] The insight gained through this admittedly small piece of PLC is grounded in attention to a dramatic performance of a play rather than simply looking at the content of the fictional world that play realized. That attention reveals a performative dimension to certain types of deception that we might otherwise overlook.

Conclusion

The goal of this essay has been to question the way many philosophical critics approach works of fiction. By highlighting a distinction between works of fiction and the fictional worlds that are realized through those works we can see that philosophical critics tend to focus on fictional worlds and they neglect important features of the works that realize those worlds. They treat works of fiction in much the same way that philosophers approach the fictions found in the counterexamples, illustrations, and thought experiments we see across philosophy. I have argued that focusing on works of fiction, rather than the fictional worlds those works realize, will open up

a distinctive variety of philosophical literary criticisms and it will make it easier to plead the case that fiction is not only delightful, but philosophically beneficial.

Endnotes

1. Some philosophers argue that literary fictions count as a species thought experiment. See, for example, Elgin and Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue." Other philosophers call that equivalence into question. See, for example, Davies.

2. A full account of the role metaphor plays in human thought can be found in Lakoff and Johnson.

3. A collection of passages in which philosophers have discussed Shakespeare can be found in Kottman.

4. We might note that unlike their Anglo-American counterparts, continental philosophers have never viewed literary or fictional language as especially problematic. Analytic philosophy, in contrast, started with a set of concerns about language that erected a barrier between the cognitive value of description and the literary value of fiction.

   We see this history, for example, in Frege's pivotal discussion of sense (*Sinn*), reference (*Bedeutung*), and tone (*Stimmung*) and his argument that sense and reference can both have cognitive value while tone can have only poetic value. Reference has cognitive value, according to Frege, because it enables a sentence to engage the truth conditions of the proposition it expresses. It connects a sentence to the features of the world that it describes. Sense, meanwhile, can have cognitive value because individuals can take two different propositional attitudes toward statements that differ in terms of sense even when they share the same referent. Tone, in contrast, cannot have cognitive value because we cannot take two different cognitive attitudes toward two statements that share a referent but differ in tone.

   As he writes in *Uber Sinn und Bedeutung,* "In hearing an epic poem we are interested only in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused. *The question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for the attitude of*

scientific investigation. Hence it is a matter of no concern for us whether the name ‘Odysseus’ has a reference as long as we accept the poem as a work of art” (Frege 63; emphasis added).

5. Danto.

6. Quinton.

7. Quinton 275.

8. Nussbaum; Cavell. The current state of philosophical literary criticsm in the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy is well surveyed in Hagberg.

9. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

10. Critchley; McGinn.

11. This definition of a work of fiction is developed and defended more fully by Richard Gaskin 28–31.

12. The distinction between type and token has been used in a range of philosophical contexts, including linguistics, ethics, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mind. In this essay, I draw on its use in aesthetics to distinguish between musical works and individual performances. See, for example, Davies.

13. “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments.
Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents.
Than unswept stone, besmear'd with sluttish time.” (Sonnet 55, ll. 1–4)

14. The distinction here is not the same as the distinction between form and content or the distinction between what a work represents and the manner in which it does so. Fictional worlds and works of fiction both have formal features as well as content. For a more detailed discussion of the form vs content distinction in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of art, see Carroll, *Philosophy of Art* 125–127 and Eldridge.

15. Nussbaum.

16. Curry.

17. Carroll, "Philosophical Insight, Emotion, and Popular Fiction."

18. Kivy.

19. This concern is more fully developed and addressed in Gibson.

20. Literary critics may recognize this as a version of the paraphrase problem, or the fear that describing a text in other terms, although opening rich possibilities of interpretation, always risks distorting that text in fundamental ways.

21. This concern is most fully developed in Lamarque and Olsen.

22. The relationship between the contents of fictional worlds and the actual world is an important area of ongoing debate in contemporary philosophy. Perhaps the simplest way to enter into that debate is to ask, What enables a claim about the content of a fictional world to count as true? Claims that identify properties or events that an author explicitly describes have a strong claim to truth, but what about the wide variety of claims we import from the actual world we occupy as readers, including assumptions about human physiology and psychology? The way we answer that question has broad implications for epistemology.

We can see this, for example, in Nelson Goodman's influential argument that any effort to distinguish between fictional worlds and the actual world is doomed, since any world, real or actual, amounts to a system or a structure and any such system or structure must be created through a process of world-making (55). So, while we can compare various worlds in terms of their consistency, coherence, usefulness, or even plausibility, it makes no sense to think of fictional truth as being fixed by features of the actual world. Goodman would argue that any talk about importing claims about the actual world into a fictional world wrongly assumes there exists an independent or uncreated world capable of fixing or determining the truth of those claims.

23. Jukka Mikkonen argues that this Anglo-American analytic emphasis on realism—the claim that works of fiction consist of propositions that represent a fictional world realistically or "as it is"—ignores a wide range of literary fictions and therefore should

be modified or replaced with a theory of fiction that focuses on what he calls literary-fictive utterances.

24. Wolfgang Iser provides one of the first accounts of the important role that gaps play in narrative.

25. Utell 153. Utell offers a compelling account of how we achieve completeness and cohesion in the storyworlds we encounter as well as an extended discussion of the ethical implications of that process.

26. Johnson 432.

27. This is one area in which Anglo-American philosophical literary critics have something to learn from continental philosophers, who have focused for decades on the important role context and embodiment play in the topic of identity. For a defense of the claim that Anglo-American philosophy has something distinctive to offer to literary criticism, see Escobedo.

28. Aristotle 59.

29. Most; Charalabopoulos.

30. We might think here, for example, of Macbeth's famous "dagger" soliloquy, where he rehearses at least three strong reasons against killing Duncan while balancing on the edge of a horrific act that many in the audience secretly hope he will dare to do (2.1.33–64). Or we might think of Hamlet's "to be" soliloquy (3.1.55-89), which begins partly as a performance for the spying Polonius and Claudius but quickly takes a turn into the darker thoughts that will engulf him. In both cases, Shakespeare invites us into the mind of someone making a genuine choice. In this soliloquy, in contrast, Iago isn't even fully honest with himself and he seems indifferent to that lack, which prevents the audience from becoming a confidant.

31. Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* 100–110.

32. "Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on, / Behold her topped?" (3.3.405–6).

33. Cavell; Zamir. One exception to the general tendency of philosophers to focus on the content of *Othello* rather than its dramatic form can be found in Rowe. Rowe argues that the pivotal temptation scene (3.3) explicitly parodies the elenctic method found in Plato's early dialogues. Putting those interpretations together, I would suggest that Iago's surprising power over Othello rests on the way he pursues a clear form of anti-philosophy rather than the mind or skill of an evil genius.

34. Eula Biss develops an unsettling account of a similar phenomenon in her explanation for why she was disturbed by accurate accounts of looting in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. She argues that even if all the reports of looting had been true, the articles about the looting would have often been racist because the purpose those articles would belie an underlying racist intent (131–44).

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell. In *Aristotle: Poetics, Longinus: On the Sublime, Demetrius: On Style.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. 1–142.

Biss, Eula. *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2009.

Carroll, Noël. *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

———. "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60.1 (2002): 3–26.

———. "Philosophical Insight, Emotion, and Popular Fiction." In *Narrative, Emotion, and Insight*, eds. Noël Carroll and John Gibson. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2011. 45–68.

Cavell, Stanley. *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Charalabopoulos, Nikos. *Platonic Drama and its Ancient Reception*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Critchley, Simon. *Stay, Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine*. New York: Pantheon, 2013.

Curry, Gregory. "Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction." In *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 161–81.

Danto, Arthur C. "Philosophy as / and / of Literature." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58 (1984): 5–20.

Davies, Stephen. *Musical Works & Performances: a Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.

Eldridge, Richard. "Form and Content: An Aesthetic Theory of Art." *British Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (1985): 303–316.

Elgin, Catherine Z. "The Laboratory of the Mind." In *A Sense of the World: Essays on Fiction, Narrative, and Knowledge,* eds. John Gibson, Wolfgang Huemer, and Luca Pocci. New York: Routledge, 2007. 43–54.

Escobedo, Andrew. "Can Analytic Philosophy and Literary Criticism Be Friends?" *Spenser Review* 45.3.1 (2016). http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/spenseronline/review/item/45.3.1/

Frege, Gottlob. "On Sense and Reference." In *Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, eds. Peter Geach and Max Black. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970. 56–78.

Gaskin, Richard. *Language, Truth, and Literature: A Defence of Literary Humanism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Gibson, John. *Fiction and the Weave of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978.

Hagberg, Garry. *Fictional Characters, Real Problems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Johnson, Samuel. *The Major Works*, ed. Donald Greene. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Kivy, Peter. *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Kottman, Peter, ed. *Philosophers on Shakespeare*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Lamarque, Peter, and Stein Haugom Olsen. *Truth, Fiction, and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

McGinn, Colin. *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning behind the Plays*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.

Mikkonen, Jukka. "The Realistic Fallacy, or: The Conception of Literary Narrative Fiction in Analytic Aethetics." Studia Philosophica Estonica. 2.1 (2006): 1–18.

Most, Glenn. "Plato's Exoteric Myths." In *Plato and Myth. Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths,* eds. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzales. Boston: Brill, 2012. 13–24.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Plato. *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935.

Quinton, Anthony. "Divergence of the Twain: Poet's Philosophy and Philosopher's Philosophy." Lecture, Official Opening of the Centre for Research in Philosophy and Literature, University of Warwick, 8 October 1985.

Rowe, Mark. "Iago's Elenchus: Shakespeare, *Othello*, and the Platonic Inheritance." In *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature,* eds. Garry Hagberg and Walter Jost. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 174–192.

Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells, et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Utell, Janine. *Engagements with Narrative*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 1985.

———. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Zamir, Tzachi. *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.