

Creative Writing: What role can fiction serve when the nature of 'fact' is continually called into question?

The words 'fiction' and 'fact' seem to lie on opposite ends of a 'truth' spectrum when in actuality, a fine line segregates fabricated from valid. This stereotype drives associations of entertainment with fiction and of knowledge with fact. Under scrutiny, however, multiple commonalities between fiction and fact can be uncovered, as the threshold separating the two is recognised as often muddled. Sometimes, a new idea can evolve from fiction to fact while transforming a previous fact into fiction; often, the pursuit of truth requires operating on fiction. The following essay discusses the nature of fiction and fact, as well as the fundamental function of fiction in giving rise to veracity when the nature of 'fact' is constantly changing.

One may wonder how fiction and fact can be inextricably incorporated in one situation; given they are commonly viewed as antithetical, the answer lies within the nature of fiction. According to the Cambridge dictionary (n.d.), fiction can be defined as 'the type of book or story that is written about imaginary characters and events and does not describe real people or deal with facts, or a false report or statement that you pretend is true'. This explanation implies that all untrue novels, myths, or even legends should be classified into fiction. Moreover, it also suggests that all arguments or concepts once viewed as 'facts' which have since been overthrown by better definitions or sounder evidence would also be regarded as fiction, as the assumptions behind the original proof would be obsolete, out of line with up-to-date views on that particular problem. For instance, it was not until recently that the notion of sharks being insusceptible to cancer was overthrown, as the book *Sharks Don't Get Cancer* had widely disseminated this misconception (Lane and Comac, 1993). The same moment evidence of malignant tumours in sharks was uncovered, the initial 'fact' became fiction due to erroneous premises supporting the now outdated claim.

While the definition of 'fact' is seemingly straightforward - 'something that is known to have happened or to exist, especially something for which proof exists, or about which there is information.' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019), there are a plethora of categories and dimensions to 'fact'. Philosophers like Locke (1690), Descartes (Russell, 2004) and Kant (2004) differentiated between these through coining or popularising the terms empiricism (a posteriori) and rationalism (a priori). The former refers to facts/truth deduced by empirical observation or experience. In contrast, rationalism encompasses facts determined via logic and reasoning. For example, empiricism allows us to understand how natural numbers and mathematical operations work, while rationalism enables us to engage in thought exercises, such as recognising there are theoretically more integers (e.g. -2, -1, 0, 1) than natural numbers (e.g. 0, 1, 2) despite both groups comprising infinite elements. With regard to this example, we would not be able to reach this conclusion through empiricism, as these infinities are immeasurable.

The definition grows progressively more convoluted when considering ideals and beliefs. Empiricism and rationalism are typically employed to explain the acquisition of universally verifiable knowledge or scientific theory: subjective concepts varying between individuals prove a poorer fit for such explanations. In recent years, support for the notion that same-sex relationships should not be discriminated against and love has no boundaries has grown. This view holds factual status for its subscribers, yet there simultaneously exist a minority of those who deem same-sex relationships 'unnatural', offering stern contention. The opposite was widely applicable a hundred years ago, with majorities sharing views of homosexuality as unnatural or wrong. Such misconceptions stemmed from limited knowledge on the issue, greatly influenced by religion and collectivism. This led to conformity to the majority view (i.e. heterosexuality) and disapproval towards deviant views (i.e. homosexuality). Flexibility in perspective reflects just how fickle and protean the nature of 'fact' is when it comes to concepts, subject to the influence of individuals and cultural differences, as well as the zeitgeist of an era.

An often overlooked purpose that fiction serves is to substitute incomplete explanations of phenomena and bridge the gap between nature and mankind. Humans have a strong predisposition to seek reasons behind seemingly chaotic occurrences. As knowledge and technology have historically been limited, this tendency has promoted the application of illogical premises to shape unwarranted conclusions. An example would be that of a mythical dragon named Shenlong in Chinese folklore – traditional belief postulated that should this beast not be honoured properly, it would destroy life by sending floods and thunderstorms (Shuker, Karl, 1995, p. 89). Given constricted knowledge of natural events, people attempted to fashion a symbol that served to emulate a higher power, an intangible driver of meteorological phenomena. This sated the intellectual desire for understanding how the world operates. Geophysics now offers a more grounded account of why thunderstorms occur, but Shenlong was deemed a factual threat for centuries, a 'fact' that was imparted from one generation to the next. Reflecting on how facts can be fictitious at one point in history, it is observed that humans have the propensity to tweak facts and employ fiction to link evidence as best they could. This feeds into consideration of how fiction and fact can be one entity for a speck of time in the grand course of history, as well as lending strength to the argument that facts are ever-fleeting.

Another example of fiction offering a toolset for understanding nature would be that of flat-earth theory. Multiple ancient myths considered the earth flat like a square or a disc (W. G. Randles, 2000, p.15), an assumption based primarily on empiricism and partially on rationalism. Feeling the ground is flat, people believed the only logical conclusion that could follow was one of a flat earth. Not until Ancient Greece's classical period, when the earth was proven to be round by scholars like Pythagoras and Aristotle (Dicks, 1970, p.68) did this fallacy ever receive challenge. Alongside the superstitious example outlined in the previous paragraph, this case shows humans of old shared a tendency to superimpose fiction into their precepts of the world to explain how phenomena out of their control work.

Additionally, the historical purpose of fiction as a tentative explanation for physical phenomena leads to the notion that fiction catalyses humankind's attainment of proximity to pure truth. As American biochemist Isaac Asimov once said, 'Today's science fiction is tomorrow's science fact.' (Says, 2019). Sometimes, seemingly irrational ideas can perpetuate the discovery of pure truth. For instance, the understanding of atoms accumulated is primarily based on empiricism. As technological advancement increases over time, we understand more about these minute, microscopic matters. Greek philosopher Democritus at 400BC first suggested that all matter is made out of solid atoms, devoid of internal structure (Pullman, Bernard, 1998, pp. 31–33). Due to limited research on particles, it proved impossible to draw an accurate conclusion at the time. As more human effort and time were devoted to the investigation of what makes up all matter on earth, more groundbreaking discoveries were made as time progressed, such as acknowledging the existence of electrons. Future generations did nevertheless deem this model as oversimplistic, which sparked ideas among scientists who were motivated to challenge the previous theory. Consequently, discoveries of nuclei formed by protons and neutrons, sub-shells, as well as orbitals within the atom were achieved while leaving much more yet to be understood. The exploration of atoms is just a tiny fragment of proof that humanity tends to search for faults in theories, to update or overthrow them and establish models congruent with up-to-date findings. Even though such assumptions seem ineffectual and ignorant on the surface, making no intuitive contribution to modern society, every single flaw, in fact, holds a salient position in the domino effect by provoking future generations to ponder and contemplate the flaws embedded in current facts, eventually building more accurate concepts and unearthing pure truth. It remains unlikely we will ever know if we have reached pure truth, yet the mentality to unveil facts and transform them into fiction gives rise to the momentum so fundamental for our society to improve.

Lastly, fiction sometimes draws attention to a fact more than a systematic, objective account can. Virginia Woolf used several fictional stories in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) to demonstrate the

underlying issues brought forth by male domination in society 100 years ago. She made reference to fictional places and characters like 'Oxbridge' or 'Judith Shakespeare' to highlight how oppressed women cannot stand up for themselves. The utilisation of fictional stories carrying nuggets of truth was able to convey her beliefs effectively that women should receive the same financial freedom as men, while also expressing her yearning for gender equality through educational opportunities and fairer resource allocation, as seen from the considerable amount of impact Woolf's fictional works brought to the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. Although the concept of gender equality may have been open to greater interpretation during the author's lifetime, Woolf's adamant that women should be granted an equal amount of opportunities and resources as men drives, when interwoven with fiction, her feminist tenets closer to pure truth, by virtue of inviting scrutiny of perspective.

There is much more to the term 'fiction' than mere fabrication and entertainment. Without a shadow of a doubt, fiction, often underestimated, contributes colossally to society for more revolutionary discoveries by means of laying the foundation for facts to be proved in the future, as well as being the source of spark to enlighten scientists for more revolutionary discovery of facts. I remain hopeful that through the aid of fiction, future generations can advance closer to the pure truths humankind has always been longing for.

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