**A New Class of Fictional Truths[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

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**Abstract**: It is widely agreed that more is true in a work of fiction than explicitly said. In addition to directly stipulated fictional content (explicit truth), inference and background assumptions give us implicit truths. However, this taxonomy of fictional truths overlooks an important class of fictional truth: those generated by literary *formal features*. Fictional works generate fictional content by both semantic and formal means, and content arising from formal features such as italics or font size are neither explicit nor implicit: not explicit since formal features don’t *say* anything; and not implicit since content generated from formal features doesn’t rely on other truths or background assumptions. In addition to showing that our current classification is incomplete, the new class of fictional truths provides four further upshots for definitions of fictional truth, story and work identity conditions, and the relationship between literary interpretation and fictional truth.

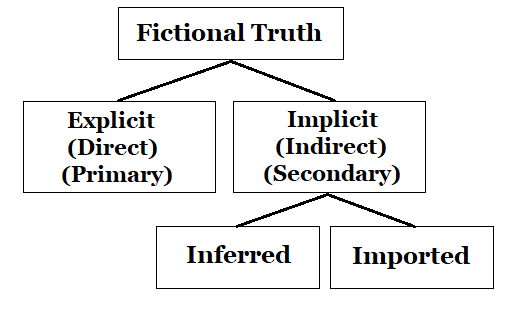
**Key words**: Fiction; philosophy and literature; ontology of art; form

**I. Introduction**

Fictional truth is a concept involved in familiar practice. We readily judge ‘Hamlet is a prince’ true and ‘Hamlet marries Ophelia’ false. The fact that we assign ‘true’ or ‘false’ to statements about states of affairs in *Hamlet* – while also admitting that in *some* sense, both statements are false (because Hamlet doesn’t exist) – commits us to the notion of fictional truth, which is truth according to a work of fiction, or what is fictionally the case (Currie 1990). What is ‘fictionally true’ is part of the fictional content, a part of the story of a particular fictional work.

How do we find out, or determine, what is true in a fiction? In the simplest case, authors tell us what is fictionally true by telling us what is true in the story.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, most philosophers of fiction admit that there are classes of fictional truths that we are not explicitly told about.[[3]](#footnote-3) There is a ‘Says-Is’ gap in fiction (Xhignesse 2021); not everything that is true in fiction is said in fiction (e.g. we’re not told, yet we know, that Cathy Ames from *East of Eden* walked on two feet), and not everything that is said in fiction is true in fiction, either (e.g. an unreliable narrator might make a dubious report).

In addition to explicit fictional truths, then, there are also *implicit* fictional truths, truths that we are not directly or explicitly told about. Implicit truths further split into *imported* and *inferred* fictional truths: imported fictional truths stem from the assumption that the fictional world is like our world unless specified otherwise (Friend 2017) or from adopting unstated background truths (e.g. given genre conventions or relevant beliefs held by intended audience, Lewis 1978). Inferred truths, on the other hand, stem from readers ‘reading between’ other truths (Lewis 1978), those other truths sometimes being a mixture of explicit and imported truths (Davies 2007). ‘Cathy Ames starts a rumor about her teacher’ is an explicit truth stemming from a relevant sentence in *East of Eden*.[[4]](#footnote-4) ‘Cathy Ames is smaller than the Sun’ is an imported truth stemming from our assumption that the fictional world’s human and star sizes are similar to ours. And ‘Cathy is a sociopath’ is an inferred truth from her cruel, unfeeling ways. This taxonomy is widely accepted in the literature:[[5]](#footnote-5)



The aim of this paper is to show that the above taxonomy leaves out an important class of fictional truths: those generated by non-semantic, formal features of a work of fiction which focus on the visual and audible aspects of the text. Most philosophers of fiction believe in the Says-Is gap, but we need to go further since fictional truths created by formal features are neither explicit nor implicit; they are directly generated like explicit truths, but they are not products of what is *said*, and they do not rely on facts about the real world and are not inferred from other fictional truths. Formal features show us there is a mechanism of fictional truth generation overlooked by the current account and thus equips us to describe the Says-Is gap with more nuance.

Explaining how formal features contribute to fictional truth also shows the intimate relationship between philosophy of fiction and literary criticism. Formal features don’t just show up in niche, experimental literature. The practice of using visual and audible features of a text to convey content enjoys a long history and wide applications spanning from medieval illuminated manuscripts to children’s literature to realist novels to graphic novels. Understanding how formal features work is an important aspect of determining content. As such, theorizing about fictional truth without also accounting for formal features’ contribution is to leave behind an important datum.

We’ll also see that theories of fictional truth based on explicit statements, implicit understandings (e.g. based on inference), or pretended assertions do a poor job accounting for the work formal features do in generating content. Three further upshots follow: if content ought to be the identity-distinguishing feature of a story as Deutsch (1985) argues, works in different media (e.g. written vs. audio book) might end up telling different stories; contra Goodman and Elgin (1986), Currie (1991) and Yagisawa (2001), having the same words in the same order and sharing the context of creation are not sufficient for work identity; and contra Folde (2015), literary interpretation is not metaphysically grounded on fictional truths since the generation of fictional truths itself calls for significant interpretative choices.

**II. Preliminary Discussions**

Though fiction, in some sense, is precisely those things which *aren’t* ‘true’,[[6]](#footnote-6) it is not the case that anything goes in fiction. Though Hamlet is a Danish prince in a way that’s different from how William, Duke of Cambridge, is an English prince, we consider both ‘Hamlet is a Danish Prince’ and ‘William is an English prince’ to be true and ‘Hamlet is a Spanish prince’ to be false. So there *is* a getting it right or wrong when it comes to fictional content, which motivates the concept of fictional truth.

A natural question, then, is: what are fictional truths *about*? Compare:

1. Hamlet is a Danish Prince.

2. Hamlet is a famous Shakespearean protagonist.

Though both claims seem to be about the same subject, they are different in an important aspect: the former is true ‘in the fictional world’ while the latter isn’t; in the world of *Hamlet*, Hamlet is a person, not a literary artifact. 1 and 2, then, show us that fictional truths can either be about fictional persons or literary artifacts.[[7]](#footnote-7) The focus of this article is on claims like 1, statements that convey what is true within a fictional narrative.

Though works of fiction span a wide range of media, I’ll be focusing on prose fiction because formal features have not been discussed as widely for prose. Poetry naturally invites deep engagements with formal features, and visual media such as film and painting encourage readers to ask how formal elements of the work contribute to conveyed content. But the effects achieved by formal features in prose narrative have been relatively understudied, one result of which is the conspicuous lack of discussions in philosophy of fiction. This paper addresses the oversight.

Lastly: ‘literature’ is often taken to be an evaluative term while ‘fiction’ is often taken to be a descriptive term. A work is literary if it invites certain kinds of appreciation because of its thematic content and aesthetic qualities (Lamarque and Olsen 1990). To call a work ‘literary’ is to praise it, to bestow aesthetic merit to it—but calling a work ‘fictional’ does not entail making value judgments. In this paper, I’ll be using the term ‘literary’ to simply refer to written works without assuming the amount of aesthetic merit possessed by them.

**III. Formal Features and Prose Fictions**

Literary formal features are visual or audible features of a text that concern the form in which the text is presented. Examples include font size, font type, italics, underlining, unusual punctuation, sound or rhythm, repetition, and chapter division. Critics and philosophers note their central role in literature, but discussions overlook their ability to generate new and distinct *content*. Philosophers have discussed how literary form, which requires and encourages readers to be attentive, exemplifies moral achievement (Nussbaum 1987), helps us learn and practice particular skills (Landy 2012), helps us reach certain states of minds (Landy ibid.), and induces emotional effects (Moran 1994).

The relative lack of discussions regarding form’s contribution to content is understandable since the above philosophers are (rightly) motivated by the desire to shift literature’s and fiction’s value away from the content they provide, i.e. fight against *literary cognitivism* which argues that literature is (only) valuable when it provides content that is valuable. It is not always *what* works say, but often *how* they say it, that makes them special. While these insights are deep and true, it is also time to recognize the work formal features do in generating distinct fictional content.[[8]](#footnote-8) This doesn’t mean we must fall into a kind of cognitivism. But insofar as recognizing formal features’ contribution to fictional truth helps clarify the nature of fictional truth, fictionality, and our engagement with fiction, we ought to look for a theory of fictional truth that is sensitive to their work.

Literary formal features make certain things true in fiction without telling that such is so; they non-sayingly generate or influence fictional content.A few examples will ground us in the phenomena.

Sometimes, deviation from the typical physical representation of the text serves as a signal that certain things are to be imagined. Take an excerpt from Walter Moers’ *The City of Dreaming Books* where two characters are walking through a forest and hearing voices:

**‘Why won’t somebody help me? Why won’t somebody help me. . .?’ ‘Where am I? where am I . . .?’ ‘I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die. . .!’ ‘Ah! Ah . . .! Ah . . .! Ah . . . !’ ‘why won’t somebody help me?’ ‘Help! Help. . .! Help . . .!’ Where am I? Where am I. . .? Where am I. . .? Where am I. . .? ‘Why won’t somebody help me? Why won’t somebody help me . . .? ‘Ah! Ah . . .! Ah . . .!’** (1997: 25).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Here, changes in typographical features convey that fading echoes are present, the changing font size corresponding to the changing volume. The passage shows a simple way in which the formal arrangements of a word can convey the changing sound quality of the repeated utterances. Together with certain contextual clues, the changing font sizes generate the fictional truths regarding volume level and volume change, and the reader intuitively understands this effect. Here, it is *how* the fiction is told that is generating the relevant fictional truth.

Formal features lack semantic meaning on their own, features whose effects don’t describe anything specific *per se*. For instance, font size doesn’t provide any fictional content on its own (though meaningful combinations of relative font size *and word(s)* may generate fictional content as we saw). Critics and consumers easily observe how visual media such as film or paintings use formal inputs (e.g. camera angle, lighting, line, texture) to determine what is fictionally true. My argument is that tools and effects usually attributed to visual media are also prevalent among textual fictions.

Spacing can also lead to fictional truths. Here’s an example from Zadie Smith’s *NW*:

**Specially when he looks like yours. And he’s so lovely.**

**He’s so lovely your Meeshell. Lovely way about him.**

**Bev, d’you remember when we was round Leah’s that time and my car window weren’t working and Meeshell got on his knees with a wire coat hanger? After I’d been telling Leon about it for a MONTH.**

**He’s proper sensitive. Proper family oriented.**

**Whenever I’m thinking: where did all the good brothers get to? I think, breathe: at least there’s Meeshell.**

**Yeah but they’re all already taken!**

**HAHAHAHAHAHAHA By the white girls!**

**Nah, don’t be like that. Leah she’s only messing with you.**

**Don’t mess with Leah! Not her fault Leon’s a useless bastard.** (2012: 39).

In this passage, we observe a group conversation. The different indentations generate the fictional truth that we have at least three or four conversational participants in addition to Leah. We are invited to keep track of the depths of the indent to keep track of who is saying what. For example, the woman who addresses Bev also exclaims ‘Yeah but they’re all already taken!’ The tabs serve as an indirect label, and a creative use of spacing generates fictional truths surrounding the conversation.

Three more examples, one featuring italics and the others, sibilants. In *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner uses italics to indicate flashbacks and trains us from the very first page to associate the formal feature of italics with a temporal shift. In the opening of the novel, Benjy and Luster walk along a fence in search of a quarter Luster had lost. At one point, they crawl through an opening in the fence, and Benjy gets caught on a nail:

“Wait a minute.” Luster said. “You snagged on that nail again. Cant you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail.”

*Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through. Uncle Maury said to not let anybody see us, so we better stoop over, Caddy said. Stoop over, Benjy. Like this, see. We stooped over and crossed the garden…* (1987: 3).

A first reading of the passage suggests that Caddy must have been with Benjy and Luster. However, we later learn that it is impossible for Caddy to have also been at the fence since by 1928—the time indicated by the chapter title—she is gone from the house. We also observe that the italicized portion of the text is directly related to what Benjy last hears; Luster’s chastisement induces Benjy to think of what Caddy did when he previously got caught on a nail. To make sense of this passage, then, we attribute the italicized passage to an earlier time; italics indicate a flashback. It is important to understand the role italics play when getting the correct timeline, and in *The Sound and the Fury*, sensitivity to how the work is physically presented is crucial for grasping the order of events. By letting the reader make the association between italics and time shift, the novel sets up the local convention of italics indicating a flashback.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Sound qualities of a text can also generate fictional content. I offer a very short story illustrating the possibility:

It was late, maybe 1am. Had I not been up reading, I would have missed it.

*ssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss*

I ignored it. Then I smelled the gas. I turned on the light to head to the

kitchen.

Here, the sibilants heard through the string of s’s establish the truth that a hissing noise was heard in the story.[[11]](#footnote-11) We’re never explicitly told about a noise, but any adequate interpretation of the passage would recognize a noise having been heard. The understanding comes naturally, the reader immediately getting the “point” of the s’s.

Moving beyond what looks like onomatopoeia, prevalence of a certain sound can also generate more nuanced fictional truths. In *To the Lighthouse,* a passage describing Mr. Ramsey likens his thinking process to reciting the alphabet:

It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is arranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q… But after Q? What comes next? After Q there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers red in the distance. Z is only reached once by one man in a generation. Still, if he could reach R it would be something. Here at least was Q. He dug his heels in at Q. Q he was sure of. Q he could demonstrate. If Q then is Q—R— here he knocked his pipe out, with two or three resonant taps on the handle of the urn, and proceeded. “Then R. . .” He braced himself. He clenched himself.

Qualities that would have saved a ship’s company exposed on a broiling sea with six biscuits and a flask of water—endurance and justice, foresight, devotion, skill, came to his help. R is then—what is R?

A shutter, like the leathern eyelid of a lizard, flickered over the intensity of his gaze and obscured the letter R. In that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him. He would never reach R. On to R, once more. R— (1989: 34)[[12]](#footnote-12)

Mr. Ramsey makes it all the way to ‘Q’ then gets stuck, unable to move on to ‘R’— then a ship imagery intrudes with a sentence packing in no less than sixteen instances of the ‘S’ sound. Of course, ‘S’ follows ‘R’ in the alphabet, so an attentive reader might conclude from the sibilants that either the narrator is ‘one-upping’ the philosopher in a witty fashion or that Mr. Ramsey was close to a breakthrough when self-doubt got in the way.[[13]](#footnote-13) Though the passage affords various interpretations, it points to the possibility that sound qualities can generate distinct fictional content.

**IV. Lessons from the Examples**

Again, formal features are visual or audible features of literature that non-sayingly convey fictional content. Formal features don’t explicitly *say* anything because they’re not words. However, formal features are often paired with words, as with the italics in Faulkner’s work, and font size in Moers’ work. To varying degrees, formal features will depend on the word(s) with which they’re paired. In Faulkner’s case, italics play a clarifying role of sorts. In order to feel this effect, readers need to pay close attention to the contents of the italicized sentences, so sometimes, formal features’ work closely relies on the meaning of sentences.

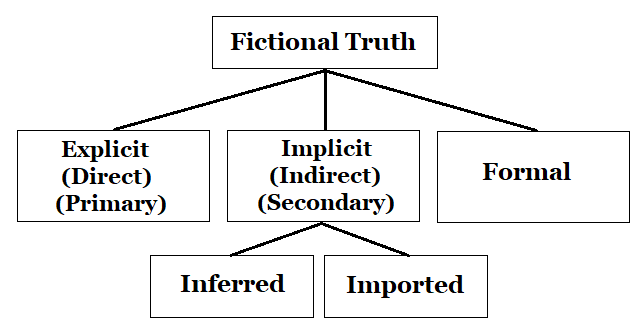
It might be that the very same feature can function formally in one context and non-formally in another context. For example, using capital letters can convey utterance and volume, but at other times it can turn something into an acronym without generating further fictional content. So perhaps there is no global way to determine when a feature is formal, but *in a given context*, a feature functions formally if it induces some effect, including the generation of new content, by its visual or audible quality.

Another way to describe what is missing from the current theoretical space is to give instances of literary devices that work in virtue of an “input” that is other than the literal meaning of words. By “input” I mean data that we work with when reading and interpreting works of fiction. Most of the time, data consists of words on the page and their meanings (which might be socio-historically constrained). But, as shown, *how* the text is presented—formal features of the work—also contributes to content. Thus, one way to detect fictional truths generated by formal features is to ask the epistemic question “is it enough for the reader to know the literal meaning of words to understand what effect is being created by this device?”

This isn’t to say that any fictional content that isn’t explicitly said is generated by formal features. As mentioned, implicit truths exist, and in two forms: imported and inferred. But implicit truths, while not explicitly said, are different from truths generated by formal features because they are “worked out” from other truths we *are* explicitly told about or from extra-fictional truths. Imported truths rely on our-worldly truths[[14]](#footnote-14) and inferred truths rely on fictional truths from which further truths can be deduced. A standard way to distinguish implied fictional truths from explicit truths is to ask whether it is true because some other truth is true (Woodward 2011). For instance, ‘Cathy plants a story about her teacher’ is an explicit truth since it is directly substantiated by a sentence in *East of Eden*. ‘Lying comes naturally to Cathy’, on the other hand, is an implied truth since it stems from the explicit truth that she plants a story about her teacher (as well as the ease with which she supplies false information).

Truths arising from formal features, on the other hand, are directly generated—meaning they are neither imported nor inferred. They are not implied truths since they don’t rely on other fictional truths. Instead, they are generated directly from visual or audible features of the text, therefore similar to explicit truths in that way—recall how the changing font sizes immediately, on their own, conveyed to the reader that a fading echo is heard; the volume and repetition of the utterances weren’t worked out from other fictional truths. But, again, truths from formal features cannot be considered explicit truths since they don’t “directly” or “explicitly” tell us the content if to “tell” is to express through sentential meaning.

So, an updated classification of fictional truths is in order. If we keep the explicit/implicit distinction, we can simply add a new, third branch:



**V. Upshot: Evaluating Current Theories of Fictional Truth**

What comes of this new class of fictional truths? One immediate upshot is that theories of fictional truth that cannot accommodate the new class should be rejected.

Explicitism, the view that what is fictionally true is ‘a subset of the set of propositions that are expressed by explicit statements in the corresponding works’ is unsatisfactory even before we consider formal features.[[15]](#footnote-15) It only focuses on ‘explicit statements’, declarative sentences appearing in the work, so it doesn’t admit inferred and imported fictional truths into the total content of what is true in fiction. Truths generated from formal features, then, give us yet another reason to reject Explicitism. Explicitism can’t admit truths from formal features since formal features don’t *say* anything, yet alone explicitly so.

Most philosophers of fiction allow factors outside the explicit content of the fiction (e.g. facts about our world or genre conventions) to play a role in producing fictional truth. However, even this expansive view don’t capture the truth-generating work done by formal features because it fails to recognize another *source* of fictional truth apart from the semantic meanings of words making up a work of fiction. For instance, Lewis (1978) proposes fictional truth to be the combination of what is explicitly said in fiction and inferences drawn from what is said and ‘background information’ (either facts about our world or the community of origin). However, fictional truths generated by formal features are neither explicitly stated nor part of our-worldly facts that we assume as background. Though formal devices may contribute to or generate fictional truths, it’s not quite right to say that they ‘describe’ or ‘say’ which truths obtain; often, the whole point of formal devices is that they don’t say anything in and of themselves. Fictional truths from formal features, then, serve as a counterexample to the Lewisian formulation of fictional truth.

I accept that more is true in the fiction than is explicitly stated in the work. But I doubt that standard “principles of generation” are adequate to capture all truths. In particular, not all implicit fictional truths are inferred from, or otherwise worked out from, other fictional truths. In addition to lexical semantics and worldly or sociohistorical context, there are additional primary inputs that figure into determining what is fictionally the case: formal features in which the fiction is couched.

Do theories of fictional truth relying on authorial pretense do better? Ohmann (1971: 14) argues that a work of fiction is mimetic; it cannot be an actual account because it merely imitates a series of speech acts. According to this model, fictional discourse is different from non-fictional discourse because the former involves pretense. Linguistic acts in a work of fiction are not real assertions because they concern fictional matters. Utterances about stories do not aim to match reality, and fiction writers are not held to the norms accompanying assertion-making; novelists, for instance, aren’t accused of lying when telling us about events that never actually transpired. Fictional truth, in this picture, is the product of an author’s pretending to recount a series of real-life events.

But what about fictional truth that arises from the work formal features do in fiction, such as ‘At least three women have a conversation’ from Smith’s *NW?* The indentations’ generation of fictional truth in this context doesn’t seem to involve authorial pretense to assert a proposition; spaces don’t *say* anything, so they can’t assert anything. It is therefore unproductive to try to explain the fictional truths generated by formal features by appealing to pretended assertions. Again, formal features don’t convey content by saying since they lack lexical meaning, and what can’t be said can’t be asserted, either.

Fictional truth generated by formal features are often shown, rather than said; sometimes it is literally shown in a psychologically intuitive sense, enlarged font showing enlarged volume. Of course, in many cases the fictional truth generated by formal features could have been conveyed by saying, i.e. by using a declarative sentence. But in general, an author who chooses to convey a point through formal features does so in place of using such a sentence, and therefore there is standardly no sentence in the text through which the truth in question was in fact generated through being said or asserted (whether really or pretendedly).

One might think that formal features *do* assert things because they give rise to a fictional claim that can be true or false. Content that is generated by formal features is true in the story—and since the newly generated content has truth conditions, its communication must have had something like an assertoric effect. Thus, it might be tempting to think that formal features *do* assert something, and that the content of their assertion is the fictional content they generate. But it is possible that formal features have assertoric effects without actually asserting anything.

We might wonder just how formal features manage to generate fictional content, especially if they don’t do so by asserting. My main goal is only to show *that* formal features contribute to fictional truths in a non-saying manner. How they go about doing so is a separate matter, though we might find helpful suggestions from discussions about pictorial representation.There’s a lively discussion on how paintings, maps, diagrams, photographs, and prints represent, and we might find hints for how formal features contribute to fictional content in them.[[16]](#footnote-16) Many discussions proceed with the understanding that expressions in natural languages and expressions in pictorial representations work in different ways.[[17]](#footnote-17) Philosophers disagree whether nonlinguistic representations are ‘propositional’ or not[[18]](#footnote-18), but it can still be maintained that maps, pictures, and diagrams represent content differently from how language does. Likewise, formal features can represent content that ends up being ‘propositional’ (to admit truth values) without expressing content like language does (i.e. by saying). Kulvicki (2015) argues that pictorial representation and linguistic representation differ not because the former lacks predication but because it organizes predicates holistically; language, on the other hand, tends to organize predicates individually. Perhaps formal features, too, can be understood to appeal to a sense of holistic fittingness when it generates distinct content. The boundary between literary and pictorial representation might be more vague or fluid than has often been admitted, concrete poetry being a helpful example for their intersection.

Blumson (2008) defends the intuitive thesis that depiction is mediated by resemblance, which supports Moer’s echo example— enlarged font resembles enlarged volume. Orilia (2010) argues that pictures in works of fiction can contribute to propositional content because pictures can be *significant*, i.e. ‘semantically laden’. Formal features, like pictures, might be ‘significant’ or even ‘semantically laden’ when they bring to the reader’s mind certain content. How they do so may admit different strategies, but appealing to convention and tapping into an associate network[[19]](#footnote-19) seem like promising starts. These mechanisms call for greater reader participation in ‘translating’ form into content, which often creates a distinct sense of fun.Cave (2016) introduces the notion of *literary affordance*, a way of engaging with a work that sees it as an opportunity to connect multiple phenomena into a coherent package. Formal features give readers the chance to treat visual and sonic aspects of the text as further data to incorporate into a coherent whole.

Given the wide variety of formal features authors can employ towards a wide variety of ends, there may be no single mechanism that all formal features work through. Formal features seem so different from each other that it might be a virtue that we can leave open how they can each contribute to fictional truth. The above examples simply make plausible *that* it could happen by enumerating some ways it could happen.

If there is no single mechanism in which formal features generate content, how can we tell when a formal feature generates distinct content (as opposed to merely being employed for non-content-related (e.g. affective) purposes)? Here, we might invoke pragmatics, which asks about the relationship among the meaning of words, context, and speaker intention. For example, Grice (1975) argues that there are certain maxims that guide our conversations. One of them include the maxim of *Manner*, which states that a speaker should make her contribution as concise and orderly as possible. When a work of fiction seems to deviate from this by, for instance, introducing an unexplained change in typography, the reader might ask why. Assuming the author to be cooperative—i.e. assuming that the change is there for a reason—the reader then consults possible candidates for meanings, sometimes using mechanisms suggested above. Helping ourselves to Gricean implicature doesn’t commit us to the view that actual authors were cooperative agents wishing to communicate. We can remain neutral between a historical author and a postulated author who uses certain formal features to generate the intended content.

Another possible heuristic includes the value-maximizing theory, an interpretive approach that looks for ways to maximize the aesthetic merit of a work. Stephen Davies (2006) argues literary works should be understood in a way that makes them the most meritorious (given genre and work kind constraints).[[20]](#footnote-20) Interpretation isn’t a way to discover or posit intentions but a way to uncover a work’s artistic merits. Noticing and reasoning with formal features is a skill readers develop, and we might expect formal features to contribute to fictional content when thinking so helps create a coherent experience unifying as many features and themes as possible.

**VI. Further Upshots: Work Ontology, Literary Interpretation**

In addition to showing certain theories of fictional truth to be unsatisfactory, the new class of fictional truth has implications for identity conditions of works. Deutsch (1985: 202) argues for the *Principle of Story-Identity*, that ‘stories are the same if the same propositions are true in them’. If formal features generate distinct fictional content, then Deutsch’s principle results in saying that a print version and an audio version of *The Sound and the Fury* are not two tellings of the same story since the audiobook would lack fictional truths generated by the italics. Of course, there might be some special way of vocalizing that accomplishes the effect italics achieved in the print version— but the point is that works we wouldn’t hesitate grouping together as works *of* the same story would turn out to be about different stories in virtue of possessing different formal features that sometimes generate their own distinct propositions.

Another upshot is that literary interpretation and fictional truth discovery are intricately linked. Debates in philosophy of fiction often leave literary critics cold; colleagues in literature departments wonder what asking about the truth maker of claims like “Sherlock has two kidneys” could possibly have to do with the stories we love. Christian Folde (2015: 372) argues that literary interpretation[[21]](#footnote-21) is metaphysically grounded on fictional truths: ‘the content of a fiction is prior to or more fundamental than any correct argumentative interpretation of it... metaphysically speaking, fictions and their content are there first’. However, this characterization is too quick since properly discerning fictional truth requires the very kind of ‘argumentative interpretations’ that Folde aims to ground on fictional truth, i.e. acts of interpretation that aim to establish further fictional truth.[[22]](#footnote-22) It is misleading to say that fictional truth is metaphysically prior to interpretation since we need to perform interpretations to get to even the most basic fictional truths; judging the narrator to be reliable, and therefore a guide to fictional truth, is itself an interpretive decision. Both ‘literary’ interpretation—what literary critics do—and the more mundane interpretation—processing what is said—require deliberation about how a work is to be understood, especially when formal features are used. So it can’t be that interpretive activities presuppose some content as to be grounded on them as there are no pre-interpretation fictional truths. Sensitivity to conventions, genre, and principles of generation formulated on-the-go (e.g. italics signaling the past), which are all tools for interpretation and appreciation, must accompany content determination, sometimes coming *before* content determination to help settle matters. If interpretation is required for the generation of fictional truth, then it can’t be that fictional truth is the metaphysical ground for interpretation, whether partial or full.[[23]](#footnote-23) Fictional truth, then, is not metaphysically prior to literary interpretation. It might be that literary interpretation and fictional content mutually ground each other, though this goes against conventional notions of grounding.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Lastly, the new class of fictional truth shows that it is possible for two works of fiction to be lexically identical and share the same creative background (i.e. sociohistorical and authorial contexts of creation) yet end up being different works. Goodman and Elgin (1986), Currie (1991), and Yagisawa (2001) argue that identical semantic and syntactic properties are sufficient for story identity; in their view, having the same words in the same order guarantees two works to be identical. Wilsmore (1987) disagrees, and recent papers continue the debate[[25]](#footnote-25), but formal features provide support for Wilsmore’s position: facts about works’ word composition and ordering are not enough to establish identity since works with significant formal features would be losing an important aspect of themselves when a copy only achieves word order fidelity.

One might think that formal features are best understood as parts of a *text*. Italics, for instance, is a variation on the physical manifestation of certain words. If so, would two works with *textual* identity suffice as being identical? Not quite, since some formal features don’t belong to any text. Unusual spacing as we’ve seen in *NW*, for example, is not a feature of any text; it’s a feature belonging to something larger than a text, e.g. a page. So textual identity—which includes word ordering and textual formal features (e.g. italics, bold type)—don’t guarantee work identity, either.

Recently, Elicker (2020) argued for the new category *graphically-fixed literature*, works where authors make artistic use of graphic features of the printed text. His examples include Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* which features a chapter composed of PowerPoint slides and Mark Z. Danielewski’s *The Fifty Year Sword* (2005) which uses colored quotation marks to individuate utterances. For these works, graphic features must be preserved in an authentic copy, so they serve as counterexamples to the view that literary work identity is determined by semantic and syntactic identity. Our discussion of formal features helps explain why graphic features of a work are sometimes indispensable, providing support for acknowledging graphically fixed literature.

**VII. Conclusion**

Fictional truth is what is fictionally the case. Fictional narratives generate fictional truth by both semantic and formal means, and I’ve provided examples of how formal features create fictional truths. The use of formal features is not an exception or an eccentric practice from ambitious literature; as mentioned, it is a phenomenon with a long history (going back to medieval illuminated manuscripts) and wide variety of applications (children’s literature, realist novel, graphic novels, etc.). As such, our current model of fictional truths, which broadly divides fictional truth into explicit truths and implicit truths, is incomplete, and we ought to acknowledge a new class of fictional truths stemming from visual and audible features of a work.

Fictional truths generated from formal features are different from explicit truths since they are not explicitly said. They are also different from implicit truths because they are not inferred from other, explicitly stipulated truths, nor are they imported from this-worldly facts; they are directly generated by visual or audible features of the text. Since literary works use formal features to create fictional content, any satisfactory theory of fictional truth should be able to accommodate the work formal features do— and so now we have a new criterion to use in judging theories of fictional truth: the ability to accommodate the work formal features do in content generation. This new criterion, when applied to a few currently available theories, shows us that theories based on inference or pretense are unsatisfactory. I’ve ended the paper by sketching a few further upshots, mostly having to do with other metaphysical questions regarding stories and works. I imagine there to be more—but at least we’ve begun the work of incorporating formal features into the discussion of fictional truth.

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2. Authors can do this by pretending to assert (Ohmann 1971) or asking the reader to pretend to hear known fact (Currie 1990). They can also provide props which prescribe what we ought to make-believe (Walton 1990). This paper remains neutral on how authors tell us what is true in the story. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Explicitists disagree and argue that only what is explicitly conveyed in fiction is true in the story. For a recent defense, see D’Alessandro 2016. For a critique of D’Alessandro (2016), see Motoarcǎ (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘Before the next day was out everybody in town knew that James Grew had been in trouble in Boston, and no one could possibly imagine that Cathy had planted the story’. Steinbeck, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For recent works discussing (and often assuming) this classification among fictional truths, see Abell *Fiction: A Philosophical Analysis* (2020) p.4, 21; Woodward ‘Truth in Fiction’ (2011) pp.161, 163-4; Xhignesse ‘Exploding Stories and the Limits of Fiction’ (2021) §2; Folde ‘Grounding Interpretation’ (2015) pp. 362-3; Wildman ‘Possibility of Empty Fictions’ (2019) p.36; Wildman and Folde ‘No Trouble with Poetic License’ (2018) p. 320; Xhignesse ‘The Trouble with Poetic License’ (2016) p.153; Yagisawa ‘Against Creationism in Fiction’ (2001) p.166; Davies *Aesthetics and Literature* (2007) pp.51-3; García-Carpintero ‘Normative Fiction-Making and the World of the Fiction’ (2019) p.270; Stock *Only Imagine* (2017) pp.22, 46-7; and Bruhns, Klauk, and Koppe ‘Arguments from Aesthetic Merit to Fictional Content’ (2020) p.214. For older classic works supporting the scheme, see Lamarque and Olsen *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (1994) p.89; Lewis “Truth in Fiction” (1978) p.41; Wolterstorﬀ, Works and Worlds of Art (1980), pp.115-6; and Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990), pp.140-61. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of course, lots of fictional truths are ‘real’ truths, too (I’ve learned about Californian geography from *East of Eden*)— but I’ll focus on truths that are only true in fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Thomasson (2003: 207) distinguishes four different fictional discourses: fictionalizing discourse, internal discourse, external discourse, and nonexistence claims. 1 is an example of an ‘internal claim’, a claim about what’s true *in* the story, while 2 is an example of an ‘external’ claim, a claim about what is true outside of the scope of the fictional story. Internal claims concern characters *qua* fictional persons while external claims concern characters *qua* literary artifacts. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Currie (1990: 121-3) and Lamarque (1990: 337) admit that how things are said in works of fiction—i.e. style, connotation, tone, and point of view—affect what is true in those fictions. For Currie, this is done through style’s revelation of the fictional author’s personality whose beliefs we are exploring. I wonder whether Currie’s discussion of style really affects the internal truth of a fiction (say, instead of the mood or general psychological truth) but it might simply be that I’m elaborating on a notion Currie and Lamarque mention. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thanks to Nathan Wildman for pointing me to Walter Moers. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A skeptic might argue that the italics merely *speed up* the distinction we’d be drawing anyway in order to reach a sustained understanding of the story. In that case, italics don’t generate fictional truth; at best they’re an epistemic tool facilitating understanding. Two quick responses: first, it’s unclear whether we would have eventually reached an understanding about Benjy’s flashbacks. Even for an attentive reader, the task of separating out which passage belongs to the present and which to the past would be very difficult and time-consuming, if not impossible. Second, Faulkner planned the book around explicit coding (he initially wanted the texts to be different colors; see Sullivan 2012). It’s a good question whether we *need* the coding to access the fictional truth intended by Faulkner, and I consider it a boon that interesting questions follow from my general insistence that we pay more attention to form as a possible source of fictional truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. We can remain neutral on whether the noise was actual or merely imagined. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Thanks to Blakey Vermeule for this example. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this latter interpretation. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Whereas David Lewis’ theory of fictional truth provides the Reality Principle which allows us to make inferences about fictional states of affairs, Stacie Friend’s *Reality Assumption* allows us to start off our fictional imagining with the assumption that the fictional world is like our world (unless specified otherwise), giving us the material *with which* we can make inferences. For example, it is only if and when we assume that humans in *East of Eden* possess organs like we do—thanks to the Reality Assumption—that we can infer that Cathy Ames has lungs and kidneys—thanks to the Reality Principle. Therefore, in addition to inferred truths discussed by Lewis, we also have *imported* truths as discussed by Friend. Imported truths and inferred truths are subclasses of the more general class *indirect* or *secondary* fictional truths. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. D’Alessandro (2016: 53) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Kulvicki (2006) for an overview on pictorial representation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Pitt (2020), especially section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Casati and Varsi (1999) and Camp (2018). Camp (2007) argues that maps, like language, ‘employ discrete, recurring constituents with a highly arbitrary semantics’ and ‘combine them according to systematic rules’ but that this doesn’t commit maps to being propositional (159). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Moran (1994) discusses how formal features tap into ‘associate networks’, calling for readers to be *imaginative*, i.e. to make creative connections among features and content. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Bruhns, Klauk, and Koppe (2020) show at least four different ways in which the approach can be understood. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. He focuses on “argumentative” literary interpretation, i.e. interpretations that mean to argue for additional fictional truth; see pp.364-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Alan Goldman (2013: 22) argues that literary appreciation and fictional content recognition cannot be neatly separated. Lamarque and Olsen (1994: 94) also write that an ‘interpretive element’ is introduced as soon as we begin to wonder about fictional content. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For related discussions, see Lamarque and Olsen pp.340-1. Folde might argue that *particular* fictional truths that preexist an interpretation are partialmetaphysical grounds for the truth of that *particular* interpretative claim. This sounds more plausible, though it’s still the case that fictional truth *per se* cannot be a partial ground for interpretative claims since we need interpretation to arrive at any fictional content. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. When A grounds B and B grounds A, there is a grounding ‘cycling’ going on, a controversial form of grounding since a grounding relation is conventionally understood to be asymmetrical. Gideon Rosen (2010: 115) writes: ‘It seems clear that the binary part of the grounding relation is asymmetric and hence irreflexive’. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Wildman and Folde (2019) pp. 323-4, which responds to Xhignesse (2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)