

Defining and recognising fiction

The following passages are all beginnings of written narrative texts.

1. Can you determine which of the passages constitute examples of: (i) factual narrative, (ii) fiction, or (iii) the novel on the basis of their *internal* features? (i.e. without consulting independent sources on the web)
2. Do any of these passages look as if they constitute identifiable sub-categories of factual narrative, fiction or the novel (e.g. children's fiction, biography, historical novel)?
3. How many of these passages look as if they were produced in classical antiquity? On what bases are your conjectures made about the period/place in which they were produced?
4. Do fictional narratives from antiquity have more characteristics in common with ancient factual narratives than they do with fictional texts from later times?
5. To what extent can a fictional text be recognised by its style? What are the stylistic hallmarks of a fictional text?
6. In the light of your above responses how would you define 'fiction'?

(a) Tears streamed from his eyes as he turned his head and stood looking at them. He saw doors open and gates unlocked, empty pegs without fur tunics or cloaks, perches without falcons or moulted hawks. The Cid sighed for he was weighted down with heavy cares. Then he said, with dignity and restraint: 'I give Thee thanks, O God, our Father in Heaven. My wicked enemies have contrived this plot against me'. They made ready for the journey and slackened their reins. As they left Vivar a crow flew on the right, and they entered Burgos they saw it on the left. The Cid shrugged his shoulders and nodded his head: 'Good cheer, Álvar Fañez, for we are banished from this land'.

(b) Chariton of Aphrodisias, a clerk of the lawyer Athenagoras, will relate a love story that took place in Syracuse.

(c) Thucydides, of Athens, wrote the history of the war that the Peloponnesians and the Athenians waged against each other.

(d) Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father; and had, in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period. Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses; and

her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection. Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse's family, less as a governess than a friend, very fond of both daughters, but particularly of Emma. Between them it was more the intimacy of sisters. Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgment, but directed chiefly by her own.

(e) Today I went to see my physician Hermogenes, who has just returned to the Villa from a rather long journey in Asia. No food could be taken before the examination, so we had made the appointment for the early morning hours. I took off my cloak and tunic and lay down on a couch. I spare you details which would be as disagreeable to you as to me, the description of the body of a man who is growing old, and is about to die of a dropsical heart. Let us say that I coughed, inhaled, and held my breath according to Hermogenes' directions. He was alarmed, in spite of himself, by the rapid progress of the disease, and was inclined to throw the blame on young Iollas, who has attended me during his absence. It is difficult to remain an emperor in presence of a physician, and difficult even to keep one's essential quality as man. The professional eye saw in me only a mass of humors, a sorry mixture of blood and lymph.

(f) Aeneas, the son of Anchises, the son of Capys, flourished in the Trojan war. After the capture of Troy he fled, and after long wandering arrived at that part of the Italian coast called Laurentum, where his camping place is shown to this day, and that shore is called, after him, the Trojan beach. The Aborigines of this part of Italy were then ruled by Faunus, the son of Mars, who gave to Aeneas his daughter Lavinia in marriage, and also a tract of land 75 kilometers in circuit. Here Aeneas built a town, which he named after his wife, Lavinium. Three years later, at the death of Faunus, Aeneas succeeded to the kingdom by virtue of his marriage relationship, and he called the Aborigines Latins, from his father-in-law, Latinus Faunus. Three years later still, Aeneas was killed by the Rutuli, a Tuscan tribe, in a war begun on account of his wife Lavinia, who had been previously betrothed to their king. He was succeeded in the government by Euryleon, otherwise called Ascanius, the son of Aeneas and Creusa, a daughter of Priam, to whom he had been married in Troy. But some say that the Ascanius who succeeded to the government was the son of Aeneas and Lavinia.

(g) My grandmother Pelagia Cembala had just finished a course in nursing when Germany invaded Poland, her homeland, in 1939. She started working with the Polish army, which was soon retreating, and then made her way to Paris to assist in the defence of France. When the Germans advanced she fled to Bordeaux, where the Polish Red Cross had an office. She had no money or possessions, and on reaching the port found the office deserted. She had to persuade some Polish officers to take her with them. She keenly remembered the journey out to join a large ship, and receiving her first ever cup of tea after clambering aboard. The ship sailed to Glasgow, and on arrival Pelagia was given papers to confirm her identity. The Polish army was regrouping in Scotland, and she continued to work for the Polish Red Cross, billeted first in the Polish consulate in Edinburgh, and later with Scottish families.

(h) I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false. God willing, I shall live to see you read these words, to witness your astonishment and see your dark eyes widen and your jaw drop when you finally comprehend the injustice we poor Irish suffered in this present age. How queer and foreign it must seem to you and all the coarse words and cruelty which I now relate are far away in ancient time. Your grandfather were a quiet and secret man he had been ripped from his home in Tipperary and transported to the prisons of Van Diemen's Land. I do not know what was done to him he never spoke of it. When they had finished with their tortures they set him free and he crossed the sea to the colony of Victoria. He were by this time 30 yr. of age red headed and freckled with his eyes always slitted against the sun.

(i) Men interested in athletics and in the care of their bodies think not only of condition and exercise but also of relaxation in season; in fact, they consider this the principal part of training. In like manner students, I think, after much reading of serious works may profitably relax their minds and put them in better trim for future labour. It would be appropriate recreation for them if they were to take up the sort of reading that, instead of affording just pure amusement based on wit and humour, also boasts a little food for thought that the Muses would not altogether spurn; and I think they will consider the present work something of the kind.

(j) I shall now relate something I saw myself, not something I heard from others. Perhaps garrulousness is natural for an old man and he does not easily reject any subject that comes his way – something just as true of a wanderer as it is of an old man. The reason for this is that both have experienced many things which they take pleasure in remembering. Anyhow I shall tell of the kind of people I came upon in practically the centre of Greece and the kind of life they lead. I happened to be sailing across from Chios with some fishermen in a very small craft at the end of the summer season. A storm broke and we barely got over to the Hollows of Euboea in safety. The crew ran their boat up on a rough beach under the cliffs and scuppered it. They then went off to some purple fishers who had anchored at a nearby breakwater, as they intended to stay there and work with them.

(k) Towards the end of October 1830 a young man entered the Palais-Royal just as the gambling-houses were opening in conformity with the law which protects an essentially taxable passion. Without too much hesitation he walked up the staircase of the gambling-den designated as No. 36.

‘Your hat, sir, if you please!’ This cry, ejaculated in a sharp and scolding voice, came from a small pallid old man squatting in the shadow behind a barrier, who suddenly rose to his feet and displayed a very ignoble type of countenance.

When you enter a gambling-house the first thing the law does is to deprive you of your hat. Is this as it were a parable from the Gospel or a providential warning. Or is not rather a way of concluding an infernal pact with you by exacting a sort of pledge?

(l) This is a story about something that happened long ago when your grandfather was a child. [...] In those days Mr Sherlock Holmes was still living in Baker Street and the Bastables were looking for treasure in the Lewisham Road. In those days, if you were a boy

you had to wear a stiff Eton collar every day, and schools were usually nastier than now. But meals were nicer; and as for sweets, I won't tell you how cheap and good they were, because it would only make your mouth water in vain. And in those days there lived in London a girl called Polly Plummer.

(m) Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway. At 06.27 hours on 1 January 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face down on the steering wheel, hoping the judgement would not be too heavy upon him. He lay forward in a prostrate cross, jaw slack, arms splayed either side like some fallen angel; scrunched up in each fist he held his army service medals (left) and his marriage license (right), for he had decided to take his mistakes with him. A little green light flashed in his eye, signalling a right turn he had resolved never to make. He was resigned to it. He was prepared for it. He had flipped a coin and stood staunchly by its conclusions. This was a decided-upon suicide. In fact it was a New Year's resolution.

This reading will help you to formulate more nuanced responses to the questions on p.1:

- Cohn, D. (1999) *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins), chs 1, 2 and 7
Genette, G. (1993) *Fiction and Diction* trans. C Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP)
(1997) *Paratexts; Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge)
Nelson, W. (1973) *Fact or Fiction The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller* (Harvard), ch1
Riffaterre, M. (1990) *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore: John Hopkins), chs 1 and 2, pp. 1-53