

Truth in Fiction
Fall 2025, Humanities Seminar
Mondays/Wednesdays 2:30 – 3:50 pm

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The fundamental question we'll be asking is a question about truth in fiction. What is truth? At a minimum, we think that if a sentence is true, there's something that makes it true. Much of our ordinary discourse is rendered true or false by how the actual world is. If I tell you that it is raining when it is in fact sunny outside, the world renders my utterance false. If you say that the tallest person in the world is Turkish, your utterance is made true by the fact that the current record holder was born in a village in the Mardin Province of Turkey. But what makes something true *in fiction*? What makes it true that Cordelia dies at the end of Lear or that Jacob has died in the Great War in Jacob's Room or that the Governess is or is not hallucinating in *The Turn of the Screw*? It cannot be a fact about how the world *actually* is, but might it be a fact about how the world *might* have been? Or is it socially constructed facts agreed upon by the creators or the readers of fiction? Do reflections on truth in fiction make us reconsider our view of how we should think about everyday truth? What should we say about contexts in which people cannot agree on a single truth? Are all of our observations of the world ultimately theory-laden?

We won't so much be trying to answer these questions once and for all as trying to make them exciting and real. We'll do this by looking at literary texts that are particularly insightful about questions pertaining to truth in fiction, fictional entities and the nature of evidence, coupled with classical and contemporary readings in philosophy.

Weekly Readings

Week 1: August 27

Introduction

Week 2: September 3

Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (background)

Week 3: September 8-10

Lewis, "Truth in Fiction" (background)

Week 4: September 15-17

Henry James, *Turn of the Screw* (Installment 1)

Franz Kafka, "On Parables"

Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (selections)

Week 5/6: September 22 – September 29

Henry James, *Turn of the Screw* (Installment 2)

Jane Austen, "Northanger Abbey"

Week 7: October 6-8

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 3)
Maragaret Duras's "Malady of Love"
Ken Walton, "Mimesis as Make-Believe" (selections)

Week 8: October 15

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 4)
Peter van Inwagen, Creatures of Fiction

Week 9: October 20-22

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 5)
Amie Thomasson, Fiction and Metaphysics

Week 10: October 27-29

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 6)
Herve Le Tellier: *The Anomaly*
Hilary Putnam, Brains in a Vat.

Week 11: November 3-5

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 7)
Jorge Luis Borges, Library of Babel
W.V.O Quine, Universal Library

Week 12: November 10-12

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 8)
Rashomon (director: Akira Kurosawa)
Paul Boghossian, "What is Relativism"

Week 13: November 17-19

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 9)
Anatomy of a Fall (director: Justine Triet)
Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (selections)

Week 14: November 17-19

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 10)
Ted Chiang, The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate
David Lewis, The paradoxes of time travel

Week 15: November 24

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 11)
Open discussion

Week 16: December 1-3

Henry James, Turn of the Screw (Installment 12)
Jorge Luis Borges, Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius
Salman Rushdie, Victory City (selections)
Berkeley, Principles of Human Knowledge (selections)

Week 17: December 8-10

Concluding Thoughts