**Fictional Works**

Word count: 3826

What happens in a fiction, stays in a fiction. Right? Wrong. Some works of fiction tell us about pieces of prose, literature or theatre written by fictional characters. Such creations are *fictional works,* as I'll call them; they are works created or invented within a fiction. Their authors are fictional characters (or the relevant acts of creation are fictional, but I'll ignore that). Because of this, it seems, the works themselves too are merely fictional individuals. They are things that exist merely according to a story. Then again, we can perform, execute, or generate instances of such works. We can bring those works actually into existence, as the works they are. But if that’s right, then something that belongs in a fiction doesn’t always stay there.

I think this possibility has not received enough (if any) philosophical attention. In what follows I want to have a closer look at the pressure this puts on how we conceive the relation between fiction and reality. Here’s my claim: given the status of plays, novels, and pieces of music as created types, we need to give up a common assumption about fictional individuals: that individuals that find their origin in a fiction are encapsulated in the world of fiction.

**1. Fiction and Encapsulation**

Let me begin with a specific example. Briony, the main character of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, writes a play, *The Trials of Arabella*.

We don't hear too much about Briony’s play in the book, but readers are given a general sense of its plot, its main characters, and of some of its most dramatic lines. I'll assume that one would have enough to go on to perform it. What is made very clear, however, is that *The Trials* is a work of theatre written by no one other than Briony. As McEwan describes:

The play––for which Briony had designed the posters, programs and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper––was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch.

Briony does not actually exist, at least not as the person she is. Nor could she actually exist, it seems, for the author of *The Trials* is a merely fictional individual. And also her sales booth is merely a fictional booth. And so is her finished draft a merely fictional draft. From the draft and sales booth she constructs to the particular tears Briony sheds, everything that finds its origin in her activity in the story seems itself merely fictional. It seems to inherit that fictionality from Briony (see also Nolan 2014: 616). Accordingly, there couldn’t exist in the actual world some individual that is the product of Briony's activity.

Or could there?

Many assume that individuals that find their origin in a fiction are 'encapsulated' in that fiction, or at least in the world of fiction. When we tell children that *Dracula* is only a story, we build our words of comfort on this assumption. It’s not just that Count Dracula doesn’t actually exist, it is commonly assumed that they *could* *not* actually exist. The credo is that what happens in the fiction, stays in the fiction. This 'Encapsulation Thesis' underpins many of our beliefs and theories about fiction, and I think it's a philosophically interesting thesis.

The possibility of fictional works presents us with potential counterexamples to the Encapsulation Thesis.

Two points of clarification. First, the thesis, as I have formulated it, does not rule out that Dracula actually exists *as a fictional character*. Some authors have wished to claim that fictional characters actually exist, as some sort of cultural construction (e.g. Thomasson 1999). Such realism about fictional entities is compatible with the idea that Dracula is harmless, because according to the realist Dracula can actually exist only as a fictional being. What the Encapsulation Thesis denies is that Dracula could actually exist *as a blood-guzzling monster*.

Second, fictional works are works written, created or invented within a fiction. We should not confuse them with *works of fiction*. The latter are stories or narratives that, for aesthetic effect, do not conform to how things are. They belong to the genre category 'fiction' (for a good discussion of the concept of a work of fiction, see e.g. Friend 2012). A work of fiction can itself be fictional, such as the stories told by the fictional protagonists Arabian Nights or, indeed, Briony's *The Trials*. But other works, such as *Atonement* written by McEwan, are clearly not fictional, but real works of literature.

I claimed that the possibility of fictional works presents us with potential counterexamples to the Encapsulation Thesis. It seems uncontroversial that works written or composed in a fiction can be performed in that fiction. Some stories tell us of the execution of merely fictional works, and there does not seem anything strange about this (see also Hayaki 2009). To my mind, it seems just as clear that Briony's play can be presented to an audience outside McEwan's story. And here I do not mean to an audience in another fiction, as when a fictional entity that originates in one corpus makes a *cameo* in another fictional work, as it were. No, I mean that the play could just as well be performed by actual people, to an actual audience, on an actual stage.

On the face of it, *The Trials* seemed a merely fictional play, just as Dracula is not a real vampire. Yet if we saw people on a stage trying to perform *The Trials*, giving voice to its lines and expression to its characters, wouldn't we be willing to say they were performing a play? Wouldn't we be willing to say that it was *The Trials* they were performing? And wouldn't we be happy to attribute that play to Briony? Surely we would. Her play is a fictional individual that can transfer into the actual world; a fictional thing that could be performed right before our eyes.

**2. Authorship in fiction**

At this point a critic could object that Briony didn’t write *The Trials*. McEwan did. Of course, they will say, it is true that in the fiction Briony wrote the play, but in reality it was McEwan.

This objection rests on a confusion. McEwan didn't write a play. He wrote a story in which a play was written. Those are distinct acts. Compare, if in a story someone gives birth to twins, this of course does not entail that someone in reality gave birth to twins. It only follows that in reality someone conceived a story in which someone did. No doubt, just as any other work of theatre, *The Trails* must have some author or other. But there is no reason to attribute the play to McEwan. From what we read in the story, it’s clear that Briony may be identified as its author. The fact that it is only true in the fiction that she wrote the play doesn’t sever the authorial tie between her and that play.

So where does that leave us? I've suggested we can actually perform a fictional work such as *The Trials of Arabella*. If one can actually perform a fictional work, then a fictional individual can exist actually. But the Encapsulation Thesis entails that no fictional individual can exist actually; such ficta are supposed to be encapsulated. We shouldn't get too worried, as it seems still fine to trick children to believe the Encapsulation Thesis if it makes them sleep better. But as a philosophical thesis about fiction that thesis is untenable.

**3. Individuals, repeatables, scripts**

Is that the end of the Encapsulation Thesis? There may seem to be another way out. Let us consider this for a moment.

Someone critical of what I just said could object that all I have identified is the *appearance* of fiction-to-reality transfer, and not the real thing. They think that a play we actually perform can at best resemble the play Briony wrote, and resemble it very closely indeed. But this doesn’t take away that it is not the same play. The critic I now envisage brings in that it simply cannot be the same play.

How can they assert this with confidence? I think some may exaggerate the significance of the play's individuality. I assumed *The Trials* is written by Briony, a fictional character, and so is itself a fictional character of sorts. *The Trials* is an individual that finds its origin in a fiction. But individuals are bound to an historical setting––or so the critic contends. Any individual is an entity uniquely placed at a point in time and space. It can only travel, grow, be moved or reproduce into places and times connected with an original point it occupied. Assuming that each fiction––or perhaps fiction as such––makes its own distinct historical setting, it is impossible for such individuals to leap from fiction into reality. Because a purely fictional narrative unfolds in a distinct fictional universe, so to say, there do not run any spatio-temporal paths between such a fictional universe and the actual one. This would give ground for confidently concluding that no actually performed play could be the play Briony wrote in McEwan's fictional narrative.

There is something to this. But this line of reasoning can only be confidently developed as an objection to my argument if an over-generalisation is made. And I reject that over-generalisation.

It’s worth bringing out what’s right about the observation. Individuals, at least as they are commonly conceived, are intimately tied to their historical setting. Think of buildings. Buildings are built at some point in time, and at specific locations. Such spatiotemporal facts about a building are essential to it. If we know of a building *x* that it is located at a time and place in which building *y* is not located, we can safely conclude that building *x* and building *y* are distinct. The Japanese are known for their replicas of Dutch houses, but no matter how well they manage to copy them, they will never manage to build one of the buildings erected in Holland during the Golden Age. Any degree of resemblance between them is simply irrelevant to questions of numerical identity. For the same reason, a merely fictional building cannot exist in the actual world.

Of course a play is not just any sort of individual. It is a repeatable individual or, in P.F. Strawson's way, a *type* (Strawson 1959: 231). So doesn’t its repeatability liberate it from its historical situation? I think not. The current objection brings out that point nicely. For, even repeatable individuals can be confined to their historical setting in a way that confirms the Encapsulation Thesis. Take an etching, for instance. There is no way you can hang a print in your house pulled from an etching done by a merely fictional character. Why not? Well, for it to be such a print, the paper on your wall would have had to have touched a merely fictional etching plate. Impossible. Touching requires just that kind of historical path that is unavailable to a creature of fiction.

So the critic does seem to have a point. I suggested that there seems to be no good reason why you and I couldn't in principle get together and perform *The Trials of Arabella*, the play Briony wrote. The critic now thinks to have such a reason: individuals, even repeatable ones, are tied to their historical setting in a way that confines them to it. It seems that individuality trumps repeatability.

But this overlooks the role of notation or scoring. Not all instances of repeatable individuals depend on a historical path from original to print or reproduction. At least as we typically conceive of them, for all repeatable works further instances can be generated either by mechanically copying from existing instances (e.g. from an original or mould), *or else* by producing instances by following a set of guidelines or recipe (cf. Walters 2013). Accordingly, even if we cannot mechanically copy a fictional work, we may still be able to generate instances of it by following a set of guidelines or recipe, if these are available. Notation or scoring makes plays, poems, operas and the like into a special sort of repeatable individuals. They are *allographic*, to use Goodman's term (but without accepting the specific theory of work identity he builds on top of it). Even when fictionally created, allographic repeatables can be printed, performed or sung in real life, as long as their fictional scores or scripts are accessible. And for some fictional works, such scores or scripts are accessible. Ultimately, notation trumps individuality.

**4. Real-word immigrants**

The Encapsulation Thesis faces counterexamples, not because fictional works can be repeatable individuals, but because they can be repeatable individuals of a specific, allographic sort. They can be individuals created at a specific point in a fictional history, but allow for instances to be generated in light of a set of rules or following a procedure. That liberates them, at least potentially, from their original fictional setting. All that is required is that someone pick up that task, regardless of whether they themselves are merely fictional or not. This entails that fictional works can break free from their spatio-temporal setting in a way that is impossible for other sorts of individuals, such as people, buildings and etchings.

If this is right, then some of the individuals we find in the world around us could have originated in a merely fictional work. To stretch somewhat the terminology suggested by Parsons (1980: 51–52), it is possible for the actual world to contain 'immigrants', individuals that came into existence due to what happened in a merely fictional story. Native to some fiction or other, such immigrants would have found their way into the real world because someone generated an actual instance of them, for example by performing a fictional play.

The range of possible real-world immigrants is restricted. At least on the basis of what I've said so far, we have only reason to assume possible candidates belong to a specific sort of repeatable individuals. The argument doesn’t get us to Dracula, for instance. Accordingly, though my conclusions have philosophical relevance, they are unlikely to keep children awake at night.

**5. Embodiment and type existence**

As I formulated the Encapsulation Thesis, it maintained that fictional individuals do not and cannot exist in the real world. This is untenable as a general thesis, because, as I have shown, some fictional individuals *can* exist in the real world. My argument so far thus only builds on the possibility of such real world immigrants. And that suffices for the dispute about the Encapsulation Thesis, which denies their possibility.

Yet if we replace one of its premises with a stronger version, we can use the argument to establish not only that *The Trials* could actually exist, but that the play *does* actually exist, regardless of whether anyone actually performed it or not. In other words, that merely figuring in the novel as it does suffices for its actual existence as a work of theatre.

This may seem surprising. We've seen that as soon as we actually perform the play, the play actually exists. But could it be that it existed even before that, just in virtue of the completion of *Atonement*, the novel that contains the play's origination? Although it may seem far-fetched at first, I think there's some reason to take also this seriously. To see this, it's helpful to look more closely at the premises of my argument:

1. *The Trials* is a fictional individual

2. *The Trials*, a fictional individual, is a play

3. Plays are repeatable individuals

4. If one can actually perform a repeatable individual, then that individual can actually exist

5. We can actually perform *The Trials*, a fictional individual

6. *The Trials*, a fictional individual, can actually exist

Recall, the Encapsulation Thesis implies that, say, Sherlock Holmes, because that character is a merely fictional detective, cannot actually exist, at least not as a detective. And so earlier I used (6) to undermine the Encapsulation Thesis:

6. *The Trials*, a fictional individual, can actually exist

7. If the Encapsulation Thesis is right, then a fictional individual cannot actually exist

8. Therefore, the Encapsulation Thesis is not right

The reasoning here is straightforward. But if we could replace the fourth premise with a conditional involving categorical existence in its consequent, instead of merely possible existence, we would be able to use the argument from (1) to (6) to conclude that *The Trials* exists. The amended argument would then run as follows:

1. *The Trials* is a fictional individual

2. *The Trials* is a play

3. Plays are repeatable individuals

4’. If one can actually perform a repeatable individual, then that individual **does** actually exist

5. We can actually perform *The Trials*

6’. Therefore, *The Trials* **does** actually exist

So potentially the argument leads to an even bolder conclusion. It requires us to make the stronger assumption (4'), and this may seem incredible at first. Could the sheer possibility for performance really bring repeatable works into existence? I think there is something to be said for this assumption. It turns on the interpretation of ‘can perform’.

If by ‘can perform’ we mean that the materials are available to us, that we have access to an exemplar or script or score, or can reasonably believe we have reconstructed (part of) that script or score, then the assumption is acceptable. By such lights, Briony’s play can be performed. For those in possession of a copy of *Atonement* do have access to at least part of the play's stage directions and script (and, we may assume, to enough of it).

Some authors seem to be sympathetic to this way of strengthening the argument. Lee Walters, for example, writes that “types, even created types, can exist when they have no tokens”, and goes on to suggest that all that is needed is that there is an ‘embodiment’ of the type:

It is the existence of the embodiment of a type that enables the production of (further) tokens of the type. What’s important for the existence of a type is, then, the possibility of generating tokens of that type––that is, that some embodiment of the type exists. (Walters 2013:463)

An embodiment, as Walters understands it, is not itself a token, but some individual that counts as standard or rule for the generation of instances or 'tokens' of a repeatable work. As examples he mentions both pre-existing exemplars, and recipes for producing tokens of the type, such as musical scores. Embodiments can be stored in various ways: in museum storage, on film, or in human or computer memory (Walters 2013:462).

Together with Walters I think that the idea behind (4’) captures well the persistence conditions of repeatable artworks as we commonly conceive of them. Whether a piece of music exists or not depends on the availability of its score, regardless of whether the work in question is ever performed. And accessibility of such a score, or of a theatrical script or of some verse lines clearly doesn't turn on its actual existence. We may just as well access a poem or a play through reading about it in a novel, or by engaging with some other form of fiction. If that is right, then given that we have McEwan's narrative to fall back on, *The Trials* already exists in the real world.

**6. Kripke and Gonzago's murder**

My conclusions contradict a point emphasised by Saul Kripke.

In his John Locke Lectures from 1973, Kripke maintains that the characters in a fictional work such as Briony's *The Trials of Arabella* at best exist as fictional fictional characters. His own example is the fictional play that figures in *Hamlet*:

Only in the play *Hamlet*, or let’s suppose so, is it said that there is such a play as *The* *Murder of Gonzago*. If so, we can say that there is no such fictional character as Gonzago. Here we are not reporting on what is in the play, because the play does say that there is such a fictional character as Gonzago. We are speaking now about the real world. There is in fact no such fictional character as Gonzago, though the play pretends that there is. There is, however, a *fictional* fictional character called ‘Gonzago.’ This is true in virtue of the existence of the play *Hamlet*. (2013:72)

Kripe thinks that the mere fact that *Hamlet* contains a fictional play that tells us about Gonzago does not entail that Gonzago *actually* is a fictional character. Stronger, even, he seems to think it rules it out. Just as there is no possible blood-guzzling creature that we call ‘Dracula’, Kripke thinks that there is no possible fictional character which we call ‘Gonzago’.

I think that here Kripe falls prey to the kind of over-generalisation I discussed above. He assumes that because *The Murder of Gonzago* is fictional, it cannot exist in the actual world. But as I have brought out, *The Murder of Gonzago* is not just any fictional individual. It’s a repeatable individual that allows instances of it to be generated via a script and stage directions. Assuming that Hamlet makes that script and directions accessible to a real-world performer, *The Murder of Gonzago* surely could exist as an actual work of theatre, or, if we embrace the stronger premise (4’), in fact already so exist.

Even by Kripke's only lights, characters of actually existing plays do themselves actually exist as fictional characters. And I suppose Kripke would agree that from this it follows that characters of possibly existing works of theatre possibly exist as fictional characters. And so even if the existence of *Hamlet*, as a work of fiction, does not entail the actual existence of *The Murder of Gonzago,* it at least entails the possibility of that play’s actual existence. This implies that there is a possible fictional character which we call ‘Gonzago’, contrary to what Kripke emphasised.

**7. Conclusion**

I have wanted to draw attention to a specific puzzle about fictional works. The possibility of fictional works has ramifications for our conception of fictional entities. Instead of being encapsulated in the world of fiction, such works can exist as real world immigrants in the actual world.

Although it is difficult to draw a sharp line, it’s clear that there are more potential real world immigrants. Some of these will be marginal. Others may come to figure prominently in our lives. Think of artefacts first invented in works of science fiction, and only decades later built in real life. When people say of something that it is as if it came straight out of a story, they could in fact be right.

**Abstract:**

Many assume that fictional individuals are encapsulated in the world of fiction. Yet some works of fiction tell us about pieces of prose or theatre written by fictional characters. Such creations are *fictional works,* as I will call them. Their authors do not exist. But we can perform, recite, or more generally generate actual instances of such works. This means we can bring such individuals actually into existence, as the works they are. I conclude that the assumption about encapsulation is untenable.

**Keywords:**

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