

Using contradictions: When multiple wrongs make right

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Paper received: 17 January 2016

Published online: 10 June 2016

DOI:10.31885/lud.3.1.237

Abstract. As noted by Teske, 2015, contradictions are used intentionally and systematically to convey various types of meaning in works of narrative fiction. I consider ways in which these strategies might also contribute to guiding (or misguiding) readers through narratives and some possible aesthetic considerations toward the uses of contradictions in fiction. It is also suggested that evaluations of the applications of contradictions and other rhetorical strategies for conveying meaning and/or aesthetics in narrative could lead toward a clearer understanding of what makes a given text literary or not.

Keywords: Logic, contradiction, aesthetics, narratology, cognition, reader

In her work, “Contradictions in Fiction: Structuralism vs. Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction”, Teske (2015) made the intriguing claim that the strategies for which various types of contradictions are used in fiction could be used to help defend language’s ability to communicate meaning, an ability that has been dismissed by major philosophers such as Derrida. In defense of this claim, she notes that in works of fiction that overtly make use of contradictions, the contradictions can be used for multiple meaning-communicative purposes, including to note the complexities of the human experience, to guide and sometimes manipulate readers’ interpretation(s), to contribute to themes in the fictional works, or to produce various artistic effects. The fact that contradictions appear to be used intentionally and systematically to communicate various types and levels of meaning strongly supports her claim. What I wish to focus on here are the artistic effects, and whether this material can be used to make a case for literariness or non-literariness, and if so, how, with the goal of raising some questions that might lead to further discussion.

One of the possible artistic effects is logical. In *Life of Pi*, for example, as Teske notes, the contradiction is not presented as a contradiction but as a disjunction: a choice of A or not-A

Language Under Discussion, Vol. 3, Issue 1 (August 2015), pp. 28–30

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(the existence or non-existence of God). In basic logic, such a disjunction is not at all a contradiction but a tautology, a logical structure that is always consistent (or true or valid, depending on how one uses those terms). However, in order to present an actual tautology, the disjunctive elements must cover all of the relevant possibilities, such as zero and non-zero. There cannot be another value possible: A and not-A must be both mutually exclusive and exhaustive. The disjunction presented in *Life of Pi* does not exhaust the possibilities and is therefore not a tautological disjunction; indeed, given the range of material available in the narrative, any number of explanations could be proposed for the general narrative outline. In what ways might logical structures contribute to the artistry of narratives? At least in the case of *Life of Pi*, it might be that leaving the disjunction without exclusivity and exhaustiveness provides readers with an opportunity to consider what is omitted and to consider why that material has been omitted, allowing both the information that is there and the information that is not there to contribute to the narrative, more overtly than omitted material might otherwise.

The strategy in *Life of Pi* therefore calls into question the possibility of literariness, of the better-ness or worse-ness of certain texts (although this is not a universally standard definition of literariness, I use it here in order to emphasize the idea that the task of determining what is or is not literature, and why, and how, remains an open investigation). Given a narrative outline such as man-against-nature (or more broadly, individual-against-context) or boy-meets-girl, what difference would it make that the details be provided in one way or another, or provided at all? Perhaps the message of *Life of Pi* is in effect that the narrative outline as such is all there is, or that providing narrative substance beyond that outline is an entirely arbitrary exercise. Such a possible meaning would return the interpretive task to the realm of deconstructionism, because the novel's attempts to be literary in fact undermine the possibility of literariness.

Another possible artistic effect is cognitive: requiring readers to contribute actively to the construction of the narrative. In this case, contradiction might not be the only or perhaps even a preferable strategy for communicating meaning; it is possible that in not being mutually exclusive and exhaustive, the narrative allows for greater reader involvement in the narrative, as readers attempt to determine what might be missing and why. For example, in *Burmese Days*, by George Orwell, which does not use contradiction as an overt strategy, the spatial description of the locations of the novel require readers to engage in the construction of a model of those locations as the novel provides descriptions and withholds certain information that can be inferred given what has already been provided (Perkins, 2013). Perhaps Orwell's conversational, dialogistic strategy, could be more effective for guiding readers' conceptualizations of novelistic material, at least some of them, in which case, any novel using contradictions to provide such guidance or manipulation is thereby less literary than a novel that uses turn-taking type strategies. On the other hand, given the ways in which contradictions require readers to determine the ways in which the contradictions are used and to resolve the contradictions, perhaps, according to their own understandings of the text(s), perhaps giving so much interpretive responsibility to readers is more effective for some literary purposes than the more straightforward guidance provided by authors such as Orwell. Whether or not it is possible, or even necessary, to determine how contradictions and dialogistic strategies relate to guiding readers through a narrative remains an open question.

Both are clearly tools that competent and great writers have used, and it is likely that individual and cultural preferences, both on the part of authors and readers, are aspects of any evaluation that is possible.

A third possible artistic effect is aesthetic as such, creating and communicating beauty (Chafe, 2012, following an extensive tradition beginning at least with Plato). Chafe has suggested a range of standards for determining beauty, but whether those apply differently in different cultures or different genres remains an open question. Contradictions might not be the only or perhaps preferred strategy for communicating beauty in narrative discourse (indeed, many of Teske's examples move more toward an aesthetics of the sublime in the Kantian sense), or it is possible that different types of contradictions are more or less beautiful than other types of contradictions (maybe logical contradictions are prettier than ontological contradictions, for example), depending on additional factors, such as cultural patterns, the demands of an era, or even individual preferences, which would leave some room for the well-known subjectivity of judgments regarding beauty. Using contradictions in narrative discourse could work similarly to the ways in which cubism works for visual art, by providing more than one perspective on a subject in a single work of art, or narrative discourse in this case.

Teske's examination of the uses of contradiction to communicate meaning in narrative discourse is an intriguing start on an issue that has generally been polarized into dismissals of the possibility of meaning (Derrida) or lack of consideration for contradiction as a strategy in narrative discourse. Teske's work therefore begins to fill a large gap in the available scholarship. Many questions remain, including whether and how the use of contradictions to convey meaning could be applied to create or identify more or less aesthetically valuable works of narrative discourse.

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