

Article

Taking Abstract Artifacts Seriously—The Functioning and Malfunctioning of Fictional Characters

Enrico Terrone

Department of Antiquity, Philosophy and History, Università degli Studi di Genova, 16126 Genova, Italy; enrico.terrone@unige.it

Abstract: This paper presents and discusses Simon Evnine’s hylomorphic account of fictional characters and proposes some amendments to it with the aim of explaining the functioning of fictional characters. The paper does so by relying on a case study, viz. Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *Berenice*. The amended hylomorphic account of fictional characters will also be capable of explaining the malfunctioning of fictional characters.

Keywords: ontology; fictional characters; hylomorphism; form; matter; norm; function; Poe

1. Introduction

The ontological view according to which fictional characters are abstract artifacts can be read in two different ways. According to what we might call “weak artifactualism”, the artifact is just a metaphor to mean that fictional characters are created entities despite lacking concreteness; artifacts are created just like windmills or airplanes rather than discovered like mathematical entities (at least from a Platonist perspective). Being an artifact, in that “weak” sense, is just to be the outcome of human creativity. According to “strong artifactualism”, on the other hand, fictional characters belong to the very same ontological category to which technical artifacts such as hammers, cars, computers, computer programs belong, and an account of fictional artifacts can be offered along the lines of the ontological accounts of technical artifacts. Being an artifact, in that “strong” sense, is not only to be the outcome of human creativity but also specifically to perform the function in virtue of the structure in the way technical artifacts do [1].

As far as I can see, the weak reading has been dominant so far in the ontology of fictional characters [2–7]. An interesting, recent exception is Simon Evnine’s account [8], which aims at unifying fictional characters and technical artifacts by tracing them both back to the category of hylomorphic complexes, that is, the category of things constituted by form and matter.

In §2, I will present and discuss Evnine’s account, and I will propose some amendment to it. In §3, I will rely on a case study, viz. Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *Berenice*, to show how such amended hylomorphism can explain the functioning of fictional characters. In §§4–5, I will show how the amended account can also explain the malfunctioning of fictional characters. In §6, I will draw my conclusions.

2. The Fictional Character’s Form and Matter

The hylomorphic ontology rests upon Aristotle’s thesis that things are constituted by both their form and their matter. For example, a statue may have clay as its matter and the shape of the subject portrayed as its form. Evnine [8] revisits Aristotelian hylomorphism by analyzing the notions of form and matter. On the one hand, he argues that the notion of form, which has been traditionally understood as the principle of organization of matter, can be unified with those of origin and function since the form originates from the origin (which in the case of artifacts is human creation) to fulfill the function. On the other hand, he takes the notion of matter to subsume not only stuff such as clay or marble, but also



Citation: Terrone, E. Taking Abstract Artifacts Seriously—The Functioning and Malfunctioning of Fictional Characters. *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*, 105. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies8060105>

Academic Editors: Frederick Kroon and Alberto Voltolini

Received: 23 September 2023

Revised: 30 October 2023

Accepted: 7 November 2023

Published: 9 November 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

more complex components that the form configures. Evinine calls this “a relative notion of matter” [8] (p. 2). For example, the matter of a bicycle might consist of wheels, frame, tires, etc. while its form is the way in which those components are organized by a certain process of making (the origin) for a certain purpose (the function). Artifacts, from Evinine’s perspective, are “the impress of mind on matter” [8] (p. 100), and even intentional actions, as impresses of the human mind on bodily movements, can be cast as artifacts [8] (p. 21).

In his account of fictional characters, Evinine argues that the matter of a fictional character is a “set of properties” that are put together by the fictional character’s form. The latter originates from the author’s act of creation: “Authors make their characters out of properties” [8] (p. 141). As this passage indicates, Evinine focuses on the connection between the creation of a fictional character and its form, but he does not say anything about the connection between the fictional character’s form and its function. Indeed, he does not even say what the function of a fictional character is meant to be. If one wants to cast fictional characters as technical artifacts, however, an account of their function, and of the connection between such function and their form, is to be offered. As I will show next, elaborating on the function of fictional characters will lead us to also revise Evinine’s conception of their matter.

In a previous work [9], I have argued that the function of a fictional character is to produce a singular representation about a fictional individual in the mind of a suitable audience. From Evinine’s intention-based perspective, one might say that the author *intends* the audience to deploy a singular mental representation about a fictional individual. However, we can also make hylomorphism compatible with a normative account of fiction such as Walton’s [10]. We can accomplish this by endowing a fictional character with the function of *prescribing* the audience to deploy a certain singular representation about a fictional individual. Still, the abstract artifact so understood cannot be traced back to what Walton calls “a prop in a game of make-believe”. That is because, from the Waltonian perspective, the audience is meant to imagine *of* the prop that it is something fictional, while in my proposal, the audience is not meant to imagine *of* the abstract artifact that it is a fictional individual. Rather, I contend that the abstract artifact as such generates a singular representation of a fictional individual in the mind of the audience without requiring them to imagine anything *of* that artifact.

To better qualify the normative account of fictional characters that I favor, let me introduce Asya Passinsky’s [11] normative variant of hylomorphism. While Evinine mainly focuses on technical artifacts, Passinsky applies hylomorphism to social objects, arguing that in that case the form can be cast as the norm that governs the use of the matter. For instance, the form of a border is the norm that establishes whether one is or is not entitled to cross the strip of land that is the border’s matter. In this sense, social objects owe their existence to both material constitution and constitutive norms.

From Evinine’s perspective, form is connected to both creation and function. From Passinsky’s perspective, the form is the norm that originates from the creation and prescribes to use the matter to fulfill the function. I contend that Evinine’s and Passinsky’s approaches can be combined by casting the (Evininian) creative act as the main source of the (Passinskyan) norm whereby the function is prescribed. In short, the creative act crystallizes into a norm that prescribes the function. This is the sort of hylomorphic conception of artifacts that I favor and on which I shall rely in this paper. Specifically, I contend that, in the case of fictional characters, the author’s creation crystallizes into a norm that prescribes us to use the matter in order to deploy a singular mental representation about a fictional individual. But what is the matter which the constitutive norm prescribes us to use in order to deploy the singular mental representation about a fictional individual?

If we want to specify the function of a fictional character from a hylomorphic perspective, I argue that Evinine’s characterization of the *matter* of fictional characters is to be revised. The set of properties is not the matter we use in order to abide by the constitutive norm of the abstract artifact, but rather an ingredient of that very norm. Indeed, the set of properties individuates what the audience is meant to put into the singular mental

representation that the fictional character, as a normative abstract artifact, prescribes. Thus, the set of properties, as the content of the prescription, has to do with the form and the function of the fictional character rather than with its matter.

As Evinine himself acknowledges [8] (p. 9), the matter of an artifact consists of the elements that, when governed by the form, enable it to perform its function. In Peter Kroes' terms [1], artifacts perform their (formal) function in virtue of their (material) structure. For instance, a chair performs the function of enabling sitting in virtue of a certain configuration of a material, such as wood or plastic, which the maker has manipulated. What plays the role of wood or plastic in the case of fictional characters is not the set of properties (which is rather analogous to the function of sitting) but the words or the pictures that the author has manipulated in order to elicit a singular mental representation from the audience. A fictional character can be made of words or pictures just like a chair can be made of wood or plastic. That is to say that authors such as novelists or poets manipulate words as the matter for the creation of fictional characters, while authors such as filmmakers or cartoonists manipulate pictures (possibly in combination with words) as their characters' matter.

In what follows, I will focus on a case of the former kind in order to show the sense in which a paradigmatic literary character, namely Poe's Berenice, has words as its matter while its form prescribes one to deploy a singular mental representation and add a set of properties to this representation. Literary characters, in this sense, are "people of paper", as Louis Rouillé [12,13] calls them. If, on the other hand, one endorsed Evinine's claim that the matter of a literary character consists of properties instead of words, one could not find such matter directly in Poe's text, which surely is made of words. Rather, one would be forced to state that the artifact's matter is something the reader can deduce by interacting with the artifact rather than something the reader directly faces in facing the artifact. This does not seem to fit with the general notion of matter as a constituent of a hylomorphic complex.

My argument is ultimately abductive. I will show that my amendment to Evinine's hylomorphic conception of fictional characters enables us to explain the functioning of works of fiction in a more elegant and compelling manner than Evinine's original proposal. Specifically, the amendment enables what we might dub an ontological analysis of works of fiction, that is, an analysis of the connection between structure and function that Evinine's hylomorphism would find it hard to support.

3. The Ontology of Berenice

Berenice is a short horror story first published by Poe in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835. The story is narrated by a man called Egæus and consists of four sections. Since I will be giving away a lot of spoilers, I recommend those who have never read this very short story to read it before continuing to read my paper (here is the link: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Works_of_the_Late_Edgar_Allan_Poe/Volume_1/Berenice, accessed on 30 October 2023).

The first section begins with general considerations ("Misery is manifold. The wretchedness of earth is multiform. . .") and then introduces the narrator ("My baptismal name is Egæus—that of my family I will not mention. . ."). Berenice, however, is never considered in this section, which thus entitles us to state that no pieces of Berenice's matter can be found here (though we can find pieces of Egæus' matter, but that is not the focus of my ontological analysis). Conversely, the incipit of the second section prescribes one to deploy a mental representation about that fictional character: "Berenice and I were cousins, and we grew up together in my paternal halls—Yet differently we grew. I ill of health and buried in gloom— she agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy. Hers the ramble on the hill-side—mine the studies of the cloister".

In hylomorphic terms, these words are the pieces of matter in virtue of which the function of prescribing one to deploy a singular mental representation and add a set of properties to it is performed. The properties in that set cannot be the matter of the Berenice-

artifact, as stated by Evnine, because those properties concern the function of the artifact; the function, as Evnine himself acknowledges, should be unified with form, not with matter.

Specifically, the word “Berenice” prescribes one to open a new singular mental representation while the words “and I were cousins, and we grew up together in my paternal halls” involves the prescription of adding features such as *COUSIN OF EGÆUS* and *GROWN UP TOGETHER WITH EGÆUS IN HIS PATERNAL HALLS* to that representation (henceforth, I will use small caps to indicate the features that correspond to what Evnine calls “set of properties”). Likewise, the words “she agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy. Hers the ramble on the hill-side” are the pieces of matter that prescribe one to add features such as *GROWN UP AGILE, GRACEFUL, ENERGETIC* and *GROWN UP RAMBLING ON THE HILL-SIDE* to the Berenice-representation.

Then, other pieces of matter are provided that perform the function of making one enrich the Berenice-representation by adding other properties concerning also her current (i.e., at the narration time) situation: “Oh! gorgeous yet fantastic beauty! Oh! Sylph amid the shrubberies of Arnheim!—Oh! Naiad among her fountains!—and then—then all is mystery and terror, and a tale which should not be told. Disease—a fatal disease—fell like the Simoom upon her frame, and, even while I gazed upon her, the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the very identity of her person!”.

Specifically, the words “gorgeous yet fantastic beauty!” are the last pieces of matter that still have the function of making one enrich the Berenice-representation by adding features (*GORGEOUS* and *INCREDIBLY BEAUTIFUL*) about the way Berenice *was*. The next piece of matter, on the other hand, prescribes one to add a dramatic event (*STRUCK DOWN BY A FATAL DISEASE*) and the features caused by that event (*TERRIBLY AFFECTED BY THE DISEASE IN BOTH HER BODY AND HER SOUL*) to the Berenice-representation.

Then, the narrator supplies further details about her disease: “Among the numerous train of maladies, superinduced by that fatal and primary one which effected a revolution of so horrible a kind in the moral and physical being of my cousin, may be mentioned as the most distressing and obstinate in its nature, a species of epilepsy not unfrequently terminating in trance itself”. Such pieces of matter prescribe one to add features such as *SUFFERING FROM EPILEPSY* and *UNDERGOING FREQUENT EPISODES OF TRANCE* to the Berenice-representation.

At that point, the narrator goes back to speaking about himself (“In the meantime my own disease [...]”), hence no further pieces of matter contributing to the Berenice-representation are provided for a while. It is only in the last part of the story’s second section that new pieces of matter constituting the Berenice-artifact show up: “And at length the period of our nuptials was approaching, when, upon an afternoon in the winter of the year, one of those unseasonably warm, calm, and misty days which are the nurse of the beautiful Halcyon, I sat, and sat, as I thought alone, in the inner apartment of the library. But uplifting my eyes Berenice stood before me”. These words fulfill the function of making one add features such as *BEING ABOUT TO MARRY EGÆUS* and *MEETING EGÆUS IN HIS LIBRARY UPON A WINTER AFTERNOON* to the Berenice-representation. The latter feature, however, is quite exceptional in comparison with all the other features of Berenice that we have considered so far. To see why, let me introduce the notion of malfunctioning.

4. The Fictional Character’s Malfunctioning

So far, I have proposed to conceive a fictional character as an artifact that fulfills the function of generating a singular mental representation in our mind. As Gareth Evans [14] and François Recanati [15] explain in their accounts of singular mental representations which they call “mental dossiers” and “mental files”, respectively, a singular representation enables us to gather information about the individual it represents. Specifically, the singular representation generated by the fictional character enables us to gather information about a fictional individual as if that were a real individual. Thus, the artifact malfunctions when it fails to do so. Specifically, a fictional character malfunctions when it supplies inconsistent

or false information (flawed information or misinformation) about the corresponding individual. In Paul Grice's terms [16], we might say that a fictional character malfunctions when it involves a violation of the four maxims of conversation, in particular, of the maxim-of-quality's prescription to be truthful, which here means to state what is true in the fiction.

For instance, when we read in the Sherlock Holmes stories that Doctor Watson has and has not a shoulder wound, the fictional character malfunctions, thereby preventing us from treating Watson as a concrete individual. It cannot be true in the fiction that Doctor Watson has and has not a shoulder wound. Thus, the reader is forced to cast Watson as the artifact it actually is—to which one can ascribe both having and lacking the shoulder wound. In Edward Zalta's terms [17], Watson "encodes" both features without "exemplifying" them.

In staged fiction, a possible source of malfunctioning is recasting. Daario Naharis, for instance, is a character of the TV show *Game of Thrones* who was played by English actor and rapper Ed Skrein in season three and by Dutch actor and singer Michiel Huisman in season four. As Huisman's aspect is sharply different from Skrein's, recasting prevents us from purporting to refer to Daario as if he was a person. It cannot be true in the fiction that Daario has both a Skrein-look and a Huisman-look. Daario thus reveals himself to be recasted, but the feature BEING RECASTED cannot be ascribed to a person. When the feature BEING RECASTED shows up, we are forced to stop treating the character as a person and starts treating him (to say better, it) for what it really is, namely, an artifact. We can no longer limit ourselves to enjoy the function of the artifact: we are forced to consider also its structure, looking into its "black box" [1] (p. 26).

Another sort of malfunctioning can be traced back to the phenomenon that Richard Moran dubs "imaginative resistance" [18]. In this case, the fictional character malfunctions since it behaves in a way that may prevent one to properly engage with it. For instance, according to Anne Eaton [19], the audience of Pedro Almodóvar's film *Talk to Her* is meant to add both the feature RAPING ALICE and the feature LOVING ALICE to the singular representation of the "rough hero" Benigno, and that prescription may face imaginative resistance. Specifically, the audience may resist the prescription to put morally inconsistent evaluations (rather than logically inconsistent pieces of information) into the singular representation about Benigno. The Gricean maxim whose violation here entails the alleged malfunctioning of the fictional character is the maxim of manner prescribing not to be ambiguous rather than the maxim of quality prescribing to be truthful. The Benigno-artifact, indeed, prescribes one to endow the corresponding fictional individual with two contrasting features, which make the moral evaluation of his behavior ambiguous.

Another special case of fictional characters' malfunctioning is related to what Wayne Booth calls "the unreliable narrator" [20]. In that case, the artifact malfunctions by leading us to add, through the unreliability of the narrator, pieces of misinformation to the singular representation about a fictional character. This is another sort of violation of the Gricean maxim of quality since the unreliable narrator is not truthful. However, such malfunctioning is only temporary since the work of fiction will sooner or later reveal the narrator as unreliable thereby inviting us to remove the pieces of misinformation from our singular representation about the fictional character. To wit, the narrator's unreliability is a sort of malfunctioning that the work of fiction itself can repair. Malfunctioning, here, is not an ultimate flaw, unlike, the Watson case or the Naharis case, but rather a temporary flaw that the fiction-maker exploits for aesthetic purposes. In Gricean terms, the conversational maxim, strictly speaking, is not "violated" but rather "exploited". The fictional character ultimately functions in virtue of malfunctioning, as it were. From this perspective, even the inconsistency (à la Watson) can be exploited for aesthetic purposes, as in Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *La maison de rendez-vous*, in which a character named Manneret turns out to be alive and dead at the same time. Recasting (à la Naharis) also can be exploited for aesthetic purposes, as it happens in Luis Bunuel's film *That Obscure Object of Desire*, in which two actresses, Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina, play the same character, Conchita, to stress the surreal character of the narrative. In a similar vein, Eaton [19] argues that

Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* is a film in which imaginative resistance is exploited to generate an aesthetically rewarding moral conflict in the mind of the viewer. Likewise, I am going to show that Poe's *Berenice* exploits unreliability for aesthetic purposes.

5. Berenice's Malfunctioning

The second section of *Berenice* ends with the following description of Berenice by Egæus who has met her in his library: "The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once golden hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets, now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly, in their fantastic character, with the reigning melancholy of the countenance. The eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and I shrunk involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips. They parted: and, in a smile of peculiar meaning, *the teeth* of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves slowly to my view. Would to God that I had never beheld them, or that, having done so, I had died!". This description prescribes the reader to add further features concerning the appearance of the woman's forehead, hair, eyes, lips, and teeth at the moment of her encounter with Egæus in his library.

The third section of the short story begins with Egæus acknowledging that Berenice has suddenly disappeared: "The shutting of a door disturbed me, and, looking up, I found my cousin had departed from the chamber". Still, Egæus continues to describe the impression that the woman's teeth have left on him: "The teeth!—the teeth!—they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly, and palpably before me, long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them, as in the very moment of their first terrible development". Berenice's teeth become Egæus' obsession for the rest of the day and even during the night and the day after: "And the evening closed in upon me thus—and then the darkness came, and tarried, and went—and the day again dawned—and the mists of a second night were now gathering around—and still I sat motionless in that solitary room, and still I sat buried in meditation, and still the *phantasma* of the teeth maintained its terrible ascendancy as, with the most vivid and hideous distinctness, it floated about amid the changing lights and shadows of the chamber". At the end of that day, however, Egæus is told that Berenice is dead: "there stood out in the antechamber a servant maiden, all in tears, and she told me that Berenice was—no more. Seized with an epileptic fit she had fallen dead in the early morning, and now, at the closing in of the night, the grave was ready for its tenant, and all the preparations for the burial were completed". The third section of the short story thus ends by prescribing the reader to add the feature DYING THAT DAY to the Berenice-representation. The fourth and last section of the short story, however, reveals that this is just a piece of misinformation.

Egæus, sitting in his library around midnight, just after Berenice's burial, is told by a menial that Berenice was indeed alive: "He told of a wild cry disturbing the silence of the night—of the gathering together of the household—of a search in the direction of the sound; and then his tones grew thrillingly distinct as he whispered me of a violated grave—of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing—still palpitating—*still alive!*". This passage prescribes the reader to replace the feature DYING THAT DAY with the features HAVING BEEN BURIED ALIVE and HAVING BEEN DISFIGURED BY THE VIOLATOR OF HER GRAVE. Moreover, in the finale of the short story, Egæus reveals himself to be the violator of Berenice's grave. He did so to extract Berenice's teeth with which he was obsessed and put them into a box. The short story ends with the dramatic revelation of the content of that box: "I bounded to the table, and grasped the box that lay upon it. However, I could not force it open; and, in my tremor, it slipped from my hands, and fell heavily, and burst into pieces; and from it, with a rattling sound, there rolled out some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor".

The main unreliability of Poe's short story surely consists of the misinformation about Berenice's death. Still, further unreliability is suggested by the altered state of the narrator Egæus that lasts from the afternoon in which he meets Berenice in his library and begins

being obsessed with her teeth to the night of the day after when he discovers that he himself, in a trance-like state, violated Berenice's grave and stole her teeth. Specifically, such altered state suggests that Egæus' encounter with Berenice in his library is arguably nothing but a hallucination of him, as also suggested by the sudden disappearance of Berenice from the library and by the word *phantasma* that the narrator uses while describing that encounter. If this is right, not only the feature DYING THAT DAY but also the feature MEETING EGÆUS IN HIS LIBRARY UPON A WINTER AFTERNOON and the other features concerning the appearance to Berenice in that circumstance are to be removed from the Berenice-representation and added rather to the Egæus-representation as hallucinatory states. From this perspective, we can conclude that the short story exploits (in the Gricean sense!) the malfunctioning of Berenice as an abstract artifact to emphasize the shift of thematic focus from the woman's physical pathology to the man's mental pathology in an aesthetically rewarding manner.

6. Is Berenice an Artifact or a Woman?

Fictional characters are creatures made of words or pictures that we experience as if they were flesh-and-blood individuals. An hylomorphic approach like that which I have proposed in this paper helps us to explain how this can happen. Words or pictures are just the matter of which the fictional character is made. However, the character also has a form, which is a norm prescribing us to deploy a singular representation about a flesh-and-blood individual and to fill it by means of the features that can be extracted from the fictional character's matter.

A name like Berenice can designate both the artifact made of words that Poe created and the flesh-and-blood woman that we represent in our mind when we use the artifact according to its form, that is, the norm that specifies its function. In this sense, the answer to the question "Is Berenice an Abstract Artifact or a Woman?" is "She is both". She is an artifact when considered with respect to her matter, and she is a woman when enjoyed by abiding by the norm that constitutes her form. On closer inspection, however, Berenice as a hylomorphic complex ultimately is an artifact, even though the function of this artifact is to make us deploy a singular representation about a woman. The latter fact explains why we use the name 'Berenice' to designate not only the artifact but also the woman.

Names are linguistic artifacts that play a very important role in the creation and management of singular mental representations. That is why fictional characters are usually introduced by introducing their names. In this sense, one may be tempted to identify fictional characters (as artistic artifacts) with fictional names (as linguistic artifacts). Yet, this temptation is to be resisted for two reasons. First, fictional characters usually have names, but that is not mandatory. For instance, the grizzly bear cub in Jean-Jacques Annaud's film *The Bear* is a fictional character that generates a singular mental representation in our mind despite not having a name. Second, from a hylomorphic perspective, the matter of a name are just its letters, while the matter of a fictional character, as argued so far, is richer than that. This difference in matter corresponds to a difference in function: while the Berenice-name performs the function of either referring to an artifact or purporting to refer to a woman in whatever circumstance, the Berenice-artifact performs the function of generating a singular representation about a fictional woman throughout the whole work of fiction.

Berenice as an abstract artifact, I have argued, is a hylomorphic complex, but what about Berenice as a fictional woman? If one extends the hylomorphic approach to biological individuals, as Evnine [8] (pp. 160–187) does in the wake of Aristotle, then one should conclude that a fictional character like Berenice is an *artifactual* hylomorphic complex that prescribes its user to deploy a singular representation about a *biological* hylomorphic complex. However, hylomorphism about fictional characters is not committed to hylomorphism about biological individuals. I am just claiming that a fictional character is an artifactual hylomorphic complex that prescribes its user to deploy a singular representation about a biological individual, whatever sort of thing the latter may be.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight two promising features of the account of fictional characters I have proposed. In his book *Reality+*, David Chalmers [21] argues that virtual objects (that is, objects that show up in a virtual reality simulation) are indeed real since they consist in a digital structure that causes a certain experience. Neither hylomorphism nor fictional characters are within the scope of Chalmers' discussion, and yet his account of virtual objects has interesting analogies with the hylomorphic account of fictional characters that I have proposed in this paper. Specifically, the digital structure of virtual objects in his account corresponds to the linguistic or pictorial matter of fictional characters in my account, and the "functional role" of generating certain experiences that the digital structure fulfills in virtual reality corresponds to the form whereby the fictional character elicits a certain mental representation from the audience of the work of fiction.

If this is right, the proposed hylomorphic account of fictional characters has the potential for paving the way for a unified ontology of fiction and virtual reality. Both fictional characters and virtual objects ultimately are "experiential artifacts" that perform the function of generating the appearance of an individual in the mind of the audience in virtue of an underlying structure which is different from the (biological or physical more generally) structure that normally generates appearances of that sort.

The other way-paving potential of my proposal is that it may favor an ontologically informed close reading of a work of fiction like that which I have carried out by focusing on Poe's *Berenice*. In his book *S/Z*, Roland Barthes [22] analyzed Honoré de Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*, thereby exemplifying the capacity of semiotics to inform close readings that may impact on literary criticism. In this paper I have aimed to show that the ontology of fictional characters also has the potential for doing so through an "ontological analysis" of works of fiction that might yield an alternative to—or a supplementation of—the sort of semiotic analysis that Barthes has made popular. Just as the semiotic analysis individuates the textual elements that produce certain kinds of effects and meanings, the ontological analysis can individuate the textual elements that generate the main bearers of all those effects and meanings, namely, the fictional individuals.

Funding: This research was funded by Horizon Europe ERCStg 2021 G.A. n. 101040535 "PEA—The Philosophy of Experiential Artifacts".

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: I presented previous versions of this paper at "Casts and Casting: Perspectives from Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art. A Workshop Supported by the British Society of Aesthetics", University of Hertfordshire (November 2018), and at the workshop "Fiction and Narrative across Media", University of Groningen (September 2022). I want to thank the organizers and the audiences of those events for helpful discussions, as well as the two editors and the three referees for *Philosophies*.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Kroes, P. *Technical Artefacts: Creations of Mind and Matter. A Philosophy of Engineering Design*; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2012.
2. Van Inwagen, P. Creatures of Fiction. *Am. Philos. Q.* **1977**, *14*, 299–308.
3. Salmon, N. Nonexistence. In *Metaphysics, Mathematics, and Meaning—Philosophical Papers I*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1998; Volume 2005, pp. 50–90.
4. Thomasson, A. *Fiction and Metaphysics*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, IL, USA, 1999.
5. Voltolini, A. *How Ficta Follow Fiction*; Springer: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2006.
6. Kripke, S. *Reference and Existence*; Oxford University: Oxford, UK, 2013.
7. Abell, C. *Fiction: A Philosophical Analysis*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2020.
8. Evnine, S. *Making Objects and Events: A Hylomorphic Theory of Artifacts, Actions, and Organisms*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2016.

9. Terrone, E. Twofileness. A Functionalist Approach to Fictional Characters and Mental Files. *Erkenntnis* **2021**, *86*, 129–147. [[CrossRef](#)]
10. Walton, K. *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1990.
11. Passinsky, A. Norm and Object: A Normative Hylomorphic Theory of Social Objects. *Philos. Impr.* **2021**, *25*, 1–21.
12. Rouillé, L. Anti-Realism about Fictional Names at Work: A New Theory for Metafictional Sentences. *Organon F* **2021**, *28*, 223–252. [[CrossRef](#)]
13. Rouillé, L. The Paradox of Fictional Creatures. *Philosophies* **2023**, *8*, 92. [[CrossRef](#)]
14. Evans, G. *The Varieties of Reference*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1982.
15. Recanati, F. *Mental Files*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2012.
16. Grice, H.P. *Studies in the Ways of Words*; Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 1989.
17. Zalta, E. *Abstract Objects*; Reidel: Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1983.
18. Moran, R. The Expression of Feeling in Imagination. *Philos. Rev.* **1994**, *103*, 75–106. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Eaton, A.W. Almodóvar's Immoralism. In *Talk to Her*; Eaton, A.W., Ed.; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 2008; pp. 11–26.
20. Booth, W.C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 1961.
21. Chalmers, D. *Reality+*; Norton: New York, NY, USA, 2022.
22. Barthes, R. *S/Z*; Seuil: Paris, France, 1970.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.