

Fiction versus Pretense  
[ABSTRACT]  
Jerrold Levinson

The aim of this talk is a straightforward one. It is to show that, contrary to what is rather widely held, *fiction* does not essentially involve *pretense*, and that to think so is a confusion, one source of which may be the theory of fiction offered decades ago by John Searle. More specifically, my claim is that neither the *creation* nor the *appreciation* of works of fiction requires or depends on anyone pretending anything, even if an appeal to pretense on the part of consumers of fiction may figure in a viable anti-realist position regarding the *ontology* of fictional entities, which is not my concern. What I maintain is that the central activity or state involved in creating and appreciating fictions is not *pretending*, but rather, *imagining*. Only if one conflates pretense and imagination will pretending strike one as central to what the making and enjoying of fiction involve.

Central to pretending, I propose, is an outward and other-regarding orientation--presenting an appearance or semblance, readable by others, that is contrary to truth or opposed to how things are. Central to imagining, by contrast, is an inward and self-regarding orientation, consisting in a certain sort of mental activity, during which one may be wholly indifferent to how one appears or how one might be perceived.

Pretending arguably requires an actual or potential *audience*, to whom or for whom one pretends. A dimension of show or display, in other words, seems built in to the idea of pretending, in contrast to

imagining. It will be objected that one can surely pretend to do something by and for oneself, without any observer present or any thought of an observer. But such cases are not really exceptions, I suggest, to the idea that pretending has an inherent show or display dimension, since when you are alone and pretending to, say, be at a tea party by behaving in some way, you are doing that for yourself as if you were, in some sense, an *other*. That is, you are *both* performer and audience of your act of pretense, effected by some appropriate behavior of yours. That sort of role duality, however, is no part of what goes on when you are alone and simply *imagine* you are at a tea party. In sum, pretending is outward-oriented, other-regarding, and audience-implicating. Imagining, by contrast, is none of those things.

Consider now to the creation and appreciation of *fictions*, and the role, if any, that pretending and imagining play therein. *Making* a work of fiction normally involves imagining states of affairs, though it does not require doing so of necessity. That is because the fictionality of a work, whether composed of words or paint or marble or celluloid, is determined by a governing intention on its maker's part that the resultant object be engaged with in an imaginary mode—that it be a prop in a game of make-believe, to adopt Walton's familiar formula. Moreover, such an intention can be in place and in force regardless of whether the artist engaged in imagining in order to create the object, whether novel, painting, sculpture, or film. *Appreciating* a work of fiction, on the other hand, *does* necessarily involve imagining, since otherwise the invitation that the work extends is declined and the point of the work is lost. But in no way does either making or appreciating a work of fiction involve pretending of any kind.

Focus just on literature for the moment. It is manifestly true that creating and receiving literary fictions are both quintessentially *solitary* activities. One can do them perfectly well in solitude, and as a rule, do them more effectively than when in the company of others.

Pretending is a form of *self*-prescription, as well as being a kind of *performance*. It is prescribing for *oneself* outward and manifest behavior so as achieve a semblance of doing or experiencing X, while not in fact doing or experiencing X. *Creating a work of fiction*, on the other hand, is a form of *other*-prescription, and normally *not* a mode of performance at all. It is prescribing behavior or action to others, be they readers, listeners, or viewers, where the prescribed behavior is of an inner and imaginative nature.

Let us grant for the sake of argument that pretending does not necessarily involve deception. It is still, at least, arguably a *default* condition of pretending that there is an intent to deceive, mislead, or fool those who are witness to the pretense. But it goes without saying that making a work of fiction need involve *no* such intent, and that the implicit contract between artist and audience in such cases precludes such intent. Otherwise put, it is clear that novelists, painters, sculptors and choreographers are not *feigning* anything, 'feign' being a rough synonym of 'pretend'. For audiences understand, when presented with a novel about Jay Gatsby, or a portrait of Venus, or a sculpture of David, or the dance of a black swan, that they are confronting fictions, and not being tricked into false beliefs.