

# ***History or Dream: A Comparative Study of “Tom Jones” and “Honglouloumeng” on Authorially Claimed Fictionality***

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**Abstract:** This essay makes a comparative study of *Tom Jones* and *Honglouloumeng* from the perspective of the matter of fictionality. Both texts include authorial intrusions that straightforwardly signify the fictionality of the texts, complicating the problem of fictionality in the texts by affecting the delivery and connotation of the messages, or the truths, of the texts, while such fictionality functions distinctively differently in these two works. In comparison, this essay further elaborates on how authorially claimed fictionality splits texts into multiple layers among which readers are demanded to properly posit themselves among while reading, and how the progress of readers' reading of these layered texts complicates and resolves the matter of fictionality to drive readers to perceive the messages of the works. While *Tom Jones*' fictionality progresses by distancing readers from both the storyworld and the authorial narrator, *HLM*'s fictionality functions by devouring both the readers and the author to immerse them in the storyworld. By different approaches to fictionality, the two texts lead readers to different types of truths. Therefore, this essay might offer a glimpse into the matter of fictionality in novel, on how fictionality constructs the nature of novel.

**Keywords:** *Tom Jones*, *Honglouloumeng*, Fictionality, Authorial Intrusion.

## **1. Introduction**

Fictions function paradoxically: they stem from inventiveness yet attempt to feign themselves as real, as is recognized by Catherine Gallagher [1]. Among all fictions that paradoxically draw their energy from fictionality, those that outspokenly advertise their artificial origin seem odd, especially ones wrought before the rise of metafictional concern. The claim of fictionality is often made by authorial forces, interesting enough, that the usually unconditional sources of reliability and certainty should intentionally claim the falsity of their work, an act almost equivalent to renouncing their credibility, in waiving the delusion of verisimilitude to facts. The authorial claim of fictionality then receives criticism for its deviation from the realism of immersion, growing dominant since the last century: Whether James' teaching about showing instead of telling or Ian Watt's establishment of formal realism based on the favor of lifelike illusion, all seem incompatible with what seems the abrupt intervention in the flow of integral illusory narrative.

As the more recent study gradually comes to be attracted by the study of fictionality of novels for so long a time taken by default, the paradoxical nature of fiction becomes quite more elaborated but also more confusing. Novels, whose paradoxical fictionality are uncovered by their authors intentionally, therefore for their bold exposure become some of the most complicated cases of

understanding the fictional nature, and want further research. Though the debate over fictionality and realism occurs mainly in Western literature theory, there is no reason to limit the range of sources under discussion to Western ones. The contemplation on fictionality, once forms categorized as fiction arise in the literature tradition of a culture, often sparks up, and is often contextualized and structured with considerable differences, worthy of attention for possible illumination on the topic still much a puzzle. Therefore, this essay selects two texts, *Tom Jones* and *Hongloumeng (The Story of the Stone)* for further examination, each itself influential and distinctive enough in their embracing of authorially alleged fictionality. Yet their respective involvements with fictionality, the approaches to truths through fictionality and the locations of truths differ.

For *Tom Jones*, fictionality originates from the authorial narrator spreading his comment on the story over the text. Apart from the widespread criticism against the intruding author based on the principle of immersive reality, the approvals of such authorial intrusions often focus on reliability, certainty, and therefore, another type of reality that intrusions promise. Rothstein's elaborated analysis in *Virtues of Authority in "Tome Jones"* deals with how the authorial narrator establishes his authority to achieve the desired intention in his ideal readers with rhetoric techniques [2]. A similar opinion is also expressed by Wayne C. Booth, in which the author approaches the problem through a historical perspective, noting that intrusion establishes Fielding's authority to fully control his fiction to trigger certain moral effects in his readers[3]. Paul Dawson, with his historical research on authorial intrusions, also endorses the idea that intrusions ensure moral truths: he argues that breaking the immersive illusion in fiction counts not as a violation of realism in Fielding's time, but a beneficial digression to keep readers in proper distance from the invented world and also guarantee the moral reliability of the text as "a true report of the world (162)"[4]. Gjerlevsen, occupied with the matter of fictionality as a critical component in the rise of the English novel, also regards *Tom Jones*'s authorial address of fictionality as an explication of the newly-rose genre's relations to other existing genres, justifying the genre's credibility. Another trend of criticism devotes more to the authorial claim concerning fictionality that in turn yields beneficial unreliability in refreshing readers' perception of reality [5]. Susan P. McNamara's *Mirrors of Fiction within Tom Jones* handles how the permeating elements of fictionality, including ones generated by authorial intrusions, challenge the standard of truth to inverse the relations between fiction and reality by the problem of reliability in readers [6]. Also interested in readers' response to the problem of reliability in reading, John Preston discusses how the seemingly authorial narrator serves as an apparatus to put readers into the irony of the plot with his insufficient credibility, leaving space for the idea of uncertainty in the hands of Fortune in life for readers to perceive [7].

*HLM* is situated in the context of the discussion about the mixture of Zhen and Jia (truth and falsity) in itself. A consensus reached by inquiries into fictionality is that fictionality functions through its alluring verisimilitude, by immersing its implied receivers in the illusion of life in the storyworld, another aspect of Jia: the vividness yet transience of the mundane world, as an approach to the final enlightening truths. In the essay *Fiction That Leads to Truth*, Lene Bach pays attention to how Kongkong Daoren, the character as an embodiment of imaginary readers, experiences the quest for the truth of the story of the stone to reach the final enlightenment. The author notes that in such progress, attachment and involvement to the story, or in other words, to be temporarily "deluded", is a necessary stage [8]. Anthony Yu's discussion of the novel's fictionality in the light of its Buddhism-informed cultural background also to some extent stresses the necessity of delusion: that "the illusion of life ... can only be grasped the illusion of the art (49)", the author calls attention to fictionality to highlight both the danger and the need to indulge in illusion, realized in the storyworld as an indulgence in qing (desire)[9]. Yau reviews fictionality from the perspective of its simultaneous violation and fulfillment of realism. He argues that through a series of paradoxes produced by the claim of falsity on different levels of the text, the attempt to generalize the truth of the novel into any

single element, namely “monist realism”, is deterred[10]. Thus the truth must be realized through fictionality, and in fictionality.

Existing studies of the two texts have roughly outlined the differences between the two texts: fictionality functions in *Tom Jones* by distancing to deliver the truth to readers, while in *HLM* it encourages immersion and identification as a trial to truth. Also, these studies of the two works, to different extents, all resort to the progress of readers’ apprehension of the matter of fictionality posed by authors’ declaration. Therefore, this essay aims to further expound on the effects of fictionality, the matter produced and complicated by direct or indirect authorial comments, on readers’ progressive perception of the message of the novels. The authors produce the matter by splitting their works into several interacting narrative layers and dictate to their readers proper attitudes towards these narrative layers, yet in the meantime confuse them in their self-positioning. Through the progress of reading, readers’ perception about these layers gradually alters, finally ending in a thorough apprehension of the truth through the fictionality matter.

## 2. Tom Jones: A Fictionalized History

### 2.1. Granting “Historical” Authority: Credibility

Fielding entitled his work a “history”. Indeed he styled his fictional world in a somewhat historical way: the panoramic perspective, which concentrates more on the actions of characters and the progress of the plot rather than rendering inner life, that posits the readers as the audience of a play; the zero focalization that enables the omniscient narrator—likely the correspondence of Fielding himself incarnated in the text—to assess and comment as he narrates; the past tense of the narrative, denoting the time distance of the storyworld from the narrator and readers. Yet the work does not intend to confuse itself with serious history, for its style is too blatantly comic and satirical, not only in the sense of its plot and language style, but also for its intrusive narrator that professes the work’s fictionality right at the opening of this work, and pleads the following for his intrusion: “the excellence of the mental entertainment consists less in the subject, than in the author’s skill in well dressing it up.”[11] Here marks the beginning of an authorial manipulation of the fictionality of the invented history throughout the whole work, which aims at delivering the truth of this fiction to its readers. By “dressing it up”, Fielding means to separate his work into two layers of narrative: the storyworld of *Tom Jones*, and the authorial intrusion.

Authorial intrusion dictates readers’ proper reaction towards the story, delivering Fielding’s moral lessons: the narrator “set ‘good readers’ who practices what he preaches (99)” [2]. Authority is established by convincing the readers of the author’s close control of the connotations of every line, ensuring them that the messages to be conveyed have all been given or indicated by the narrator. Its second but no less significant faculty is to distance readers from the fictionalized world, obstructing them from waiving their advantageous position of omniscient viewpoint shared with the narrator, as Ian Watt notes, might cause the loss of “alertness to the larger implications” of characters’ actions [12]. The two faculties then motivate the work to function as a fictionalized history: to place readers amid a position that they recognize as more privileged in terms of knowledge of the truth than the blind characters whirling in Fortune, but still knowing less than the narrator-author who plans the story integrally and logically yet does not demonstrate it frankly. In the meantime, however, readers cannot always predict the Fortune of the storyworld though they know more; and although knowing less than the narrator readers have confidence in the narrator to confer his knowledge fully. These effects all resort to the work’s claim as a “fictionalized history”.

*Tom Jones*’ pseudo-history is created, lacking a reference to the fact in reality. For real history, based on referentiality to reality, history’s credibility lies in the record of a series of facts and achieves its utmost freedom only in the arrangement and interpretation of incidents. It is the authenticity of

facts, not the novelistic design of the plot, that grants the credibility of history and serves as the foundation of authority. All arrangements and interpretations of history are then attempting proposals of understanding, not entirely in control in accordance with historians' will; and therefore, the categorical authority of any version of recorded history cannot be granted. Yet for *Tom Jones* as an artifice, fictionality grants the author absolute freedom to conjure up incidents and spin up a plot unavailable for authentic history, and absolute authority to dictate a teleological truth. Therefore, the narrator-author's position is even more privileged in his pseudo-history than the real historians, for he secures full control realized in his well-devised intrusions, even though he withholds some truths as he narrates.

## 2.2. Demonstrating "Historical" Experience: Uncertainty

He withholds but in an appropriate manner: Tom Jones' history is dramatic and unpredictable in the name of ever-fluctuating Fortune, the plot "free-ranging, unpredictable, open-ended (368)" as coined by Preston. While the narrator highlights a comprehensible causal chain in the turmoil of Fortune, the plot proceeds in another sequence not fully intelligible and predictable for readers guided by the narrator, for the sequence is full of "coincidence, chance meetings and meetings missed, good luck and bad, unplanned and unforeseen events (371)" [7]. The narrator-author does not empower his readers to overlook this unpredictability and take it for predestination from the omniscient viewpoint of a historical narrator but has to guide them to proper judgment by suggesting that he holds a grasp of all the drastic fluctuations and is well-qualified as a guide, though not thoroughly frank. Therefore, a double irony faces the readers: firstly the one between readers and characters, where readers expect them to know more but gradually discover that they are no less pranked by Fortune; secondly the one between readers and the narrator-author, where readers trust him to participate in his omniscience only to find their anticipation fails. Readers' reading is then not just surveying history but also encountering it: by reading the unpredictability of Tom's life they also experience how history works in progress, and how Fortune is unfolded in history, though they are always reminded as spectators of good taste, to keep a proper distance from the storyworld, thanks to the echoing reminding of fictionality. Fictionality then works as the engine of the pseudo-history, creating irony while driving readers forth to distinguish Fielding's design as they continue, until they reach the ending where the truth awaits. That truth, however, just partly resides in uncovering all the connotations that the narrator-author did not reveal and to regain the omniscience the narrator-author preserved and recognizing his full moral intent. It also resides in the ironized state of readers when they remained innocent of the twists and turns of the plot, a "historical experience" that Fielding attempted to convey: the history of "man in time", as Philip Stevick observes in his survey of Fielding's attitude towards history, a history not of abstracted tendencies but "coheres in endless and intersecting chains of cause and effect", with individuals in it occasionally both perplexed and rewarded by Fortune; and the complication of history is represented in a comic manner in *Tom Jones*, celebrated with witty laughter from irony[13]. Readers, in their retrospect to the experience under irony, are then able to laugh both comically at their once innocence, and at the comic-like fictional history as a miniature of the world in history that Fielding elaborates, which they themselves experience as an audience but no less impressive.

By "history" Fielding encouraged no immersion, but an equally immersive experience to run across Fortune beyond a fictionalized world, and a truths about a world in history reached by fictionality.

### 3. Hong Lou Meng: A Truthful Dream

#### 3.1. The Threefold “Jia”

*HLM* is dream-like in multiple aspects: the lack of referentiality to reality and its substitution for a fictionalized story as is declared by the author (“Jiang Zhenshi Yinqu”)(concealing the true events)(Note: All translations of the first three paragraphs of the original text are my own, and translations in other parts are from Cao, Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, translated by John Minford and David Hawks, Ebook version by Penguin Books, 2012.); the obscurity of the authenticity of the story on the stone in the storyworld as Kongkong Daoren (Vanitas) concerns; the transience and futility of Hongchen (The Red Dust) splendor as the stone indulges in. The affirmation and accusation of the fictionality of the text within and outside the storyworld and the motif of the ephemeral mundane world interprets the title “dream”, corresponding to and intertwining with each other to deliver the message of the fiction. Embodied in the structure of the fiction are the three layers of narrative: the authorial comment on the “dreamy” property of the fiction, the framework narrative within the storyworld about Kongkong Daoren and the magical stone, and the account of Jia Baoyu’s life in Hongchen. The author mediates between and bridges these layers, by his direct presence or the presence of his embodiment and his allusion to the imagined readers. And by fiddling with fictionality and futility, the author manipulates the deluding “Jia”, or sham, to reach the truth of the fiction.

#### 3.2. Layer One: The Beginning of Fictionality

The first layer readers meet is the passage from “Zuozhe Ziyun(The author says)” to “Liaoran Buhuo(with no confusion)”, the first three paragraphs of the work. A direct authorial intrusion, its intention is to reassure the undertone of the fiction as a dream, for it “Jiang Zhenshi Yinqu (conceals true events)”. The claim of Jia appears here firstly in the form of fictionality, not only in the sense of fictionalizing *ex nihilo* but also further in the sense of camouflaging reality: by emphasizing such concealment, the author suggests his readers not to cling to the referentiality of his work but to enjoy it as amusing nonsense. Yet defining the fiction as a camouflage might provoke readers even more than pure fictionality, for the claim to hide the truth constitutes a paradox: It has been expounded by Ka-Fai Yau that the author “engages in a version of the liar’s paradox (124)”[10] when he fabricates himself as a participant of narration within the text to declare the falsity of incidents in his work as an act of self-reference.

The credibility of the author then begins to diminish, tangled and confused in fictionality, commencing his gradual vanishing into the world of dreams of the text.

Apart from these three beginning paragraphs the author never returns in a blatant authorial intrusion: he is “descending” into the fictional world, and the third paragraph serves as the transition. It occupies an ambiguous position between the layers: written in the voice of the author, it conveys his advice to readers: “Xi’an Ze Shenyou Quwei (reflection will show that there is a good deal more in it than meets the eye)”, and is the last time the author directly addresses his readers with his authority; yet it refers to the fictional origin of the story within the fictional world, and is already in the realm of fiction. Therefore it might be considered a descending point of the author into the second layer, who submerges himself into the storyworld and shall appear later incarnated as a character, not to avoid being devoured by the fictionality he created. The descending results in the emergence of the narrator of the whole following text, and as is indicated by his reference to the fictional origin of the story, a homodiegetic one. The narrator takes over the authorial voice of the descended author. Furthermore, the narratees, invoked by a homodiegetic narrator, should also habit the storyworld; yet as readers in reality receive and accept the author’s advice of “Xi’an(reflection)”, they then identify



with the narratees. It then marks the descending of readers into the storyworld as well, heralding their immersion in fictionality.

### 3.3. Layer Two, to Be Merged with Layer Three: The Complexion of Fictionality

As both the author and readers immerse in the storyworld, they are embodied as characters. The former ones are Kongkong Daoren and Cao Xueqin in Nostalgia Studio, and the latter are the monk and the Taoist priest who bring the stone into the Red Dust, and Jia Yuncun (“feigned words remain”) and Zhen Shiyin (“concealing real incidents”). Both are perplexed by Jia: confused by fictionality and reality or wallowing in the transient illusion of the mundane world, their experiences stand in relief to each other.

The monk and the Taoist priest traverse the two layers in the storyworld, between the mythical world and the Red Dust. They traverse but not accompanied by entanglement into the illusion, not captured by Jia. Unbound as they are, they do not hinder the magical stone from a journey into the illusionary Red Dust, nor do they reveal the truth of that illusion to the world with plain words, but playfully embed it into a poem, *Haoliaoge (Won-Done Song)* in the first chapter: they represent the truth and the origin of the truth, yet this truth is not overtly available for characters—then also, for readers; and this truth sojourns in the worlds of tangling illusion and reality, but does not transcend them. Readers are about to perceive such a truth in reading to the end.

Jia Yuncun and Zhen Shiyin both undergo ascendance from the third layer to the second, from inside the story on the Stone to the mythical world the Stone itself lies in. Both first habituate the Red Dust, while Zhen Shiyin then goes with the Taoist priest, and Jia Yucun meets Kongkong Daoren in his everlasting coma. With their traversing, the boundary between the second and the third layer also blurs and fuses: “Liangfanren Zuo Yifanren” (As Man and Stone become once more a single whole)(Note: The original text could be straightforwardly translated as “the two sects of people integrate into a single whole”. For my argument here, “Liangfanren” not only refers to Jia Baoyu and Stone but also other characters that traverse the boundary of layers. And the sentence might be interpreted as “two groups of characters in two distinctive layers integrate into one group because of the combination of narrative layers”), hinting at the traversing of layers by characters. And after the Stone’s return, the renewing of the record of boundary traversing “Houmian Jiwen Li You Lixule Duoshao Shouyuanjieguode Huatou (a whole new section had been appended to the gatha with which the earlier version concluded)”, by also including the happenings in the mythical world, indicates the combination of textual layers. For Zhen Shiyin, this fusion occurs when he witnesses the end of the Stone’s journey in the Red Dust: the Jia of illusion ends, but not the Jia of fictionality. After that, Jia Yucun becomes the key figure who leads Kongkong Daoren to the embodied author Cao Xueqin, where Daoren’s concern with fictionality terminates. Jia Yucun never transcends the illusion of the Red Dust by recognizing it, but by endless sleep: a state often related to dreams. And where he awakens still exists in the world of fictionality: to Daoren he insists on the authenticity of the story, “Zheshi Wo Zaoyi Qinjian Jinzhi, Nizhe Chaolude Shangwu Chuancuo(“I have seen all this myself at first-hand. As far as I can see your record contains no errors.”)”—a sham of fictionality. Thus for readers, their endings are the sign of the termination of illusion but continuance of fictionality, and the Jia of null reference is always present.

For Kongkong Daoren, his opinion regarding the authenticity of the Stone’s story alters several times, until finally realizes Fuyan Huangtang(all utter nonsense)” of the text. Immersed readers identify with him in reading experience: Bech analyzes that Kongkong Daoren exists as the fictive reader in the text, who undergoes the maze of Jia and Zhen in the story in his pursuit of truths as the readers do, for his hybridized acceptance of the three main teachings in pre-modern China makes him representative of the “proverbial ‘every man’ (20)”[8]. The trail of readers’ reading coincides with

Kongkong Daoren's, both in indulgence in the story of the Red Dust in layer three, and the perception of the fictionality of the Stone's story in layer two.

### 3.4. Awakening, but with no Escape

The moment he gives up on the problem of authenticity, readers stop identification, and this moment corresponds to Jia Yuncun and Zhen Shiyin's departure from the Red Dust in the sense of their dispose of Jia as characters. However, as their departure does not signal the end of fictionality, the renunciation of Daoren does not remove readers' burden of the problem of fictionality. Readers stop identification, only to find that after identification with Daoren and deeper immersion into the fictional Red Dust, they are in the same case as the beginning of the fiction, when addressed as narratees in the third paragraph, in the gap between reality and fictionality. The difference is that the author has escaped into fictionality, promising no return: the authorial credibility goes absent and the extra-textual origin of all truths and meanings gets lost. Indicated in the text is the last scene of the fiction, where the embodied author rather than the real author himself addresses again the absurdity of the story—again an action of self-reference of fictionality in fiction, its credibility doubtful. Thus the reader must accept the absence of the author, facing the now unified fictional world alone. This absence renders the issue of fictionality a murky affair, leaving readers lingering on the vague borderline of fictionality and reality. The claim that "Xi'an Ze Shenyong Quwei" emerges as the only possible truth—the fictionality is the very truth of the fiction, and the "Shen Qu (profound interest)" is engendered by the process of readers' "Xi'an" and awakening from immersion in fictionality. The fictionality, as the truth, is the source of readers' "Quwei (interest)": Yau coins it as "making sense through nonsense (128)"[10]; and Yu comments that such interest resides in the "reinforcement of illusion", which is both a "need and danger (48)"[9]. Chan Buddhism's philosophical undertone permeates such truth: the truth realized upon awakening from the illusions of the world is that reality does not lie beyond this world, but rather, illusion is the entirety of reality. Thus, fictionality leads to itself as the truth expressed by the text, through a Dream of multiple layers demanding progressive immersion and identification, and the final awakening to revelation without escape.

## 4. Conclusion

The fictionality in *Tom Jones* is traceable in its authorial origin, and ultimately leads to a certain truth that lies beyond its fictionality: fictionality functions as a guarantee of moral truth and is then recognized as a window to "history", a method leading to a truth that must be grasped. In this process, the craftsmanship of such fictionality is acknowledged. Fictionality and the truth it aims to achieve are separate, the former as a means to reach the latter, and the author is the source of fictionality, crediting a comprehensible truth.

*HLM* works differently. Its boundaries of fictionality are difficult to define both textually and contextually, and the ultimate truth about the text is simply its own nature—fictionality, as both the means and the end. Fictionality and the truth it seeks to achieve are identical. It is hardly probable to discern the extent to which the author fictionalized the text (concealing real events), and ultimately, everything dissolves into the text's fictionality, offering no promise of any truth beyond the existence of fictionality itself.

*Tom Jones*, as a kind of fictionalized history, presents a form of fictionalized certainty; though artificial but still qualifies as history, as it provides knowledge and insight through the interpretation and generalization of events and characters, offering truths that can be applied to the real world in which the reader lives, for "similarities can occur because of the difference between fiction and life", as mentioned by Gjeverson, arguing that Tom's story is "thematized in an Aristotelian way (180-181)"[5]. It also offers, on the adverse side, an uncertainty as unpredictability: the truth of the

experience of history itself. However, *HLM*, as its title suggests, is a dream—a metaphor in a Freudian sense, a displacement of reality. Without external references beyond the dream, reality cannot be discussed: all the heated discussions of inquiry into the life of the mysterious author, Cao Xueqin, cannot bear a fruit of absolute certainty for the lack of validating evidence. Fictionality composes the nature of the novel, and in the absence of a reliable authorial consciousness, the only truth to be acknowledged is the novel's fictionality without any other certainty.

The relationships between fictionality and reality differ in the two texts. To generalize, these reflections reflect two sides of fictionality in the novel: one side leads to the discovery of truth in themes as generalized knowledge after encountering; the other side is the ontological completion of the novel, pure fictionality itself, achieved through illusory immersion. Novel is both a fictionalized history and a truthful dream, and the author is both the authorizer and interpreter of meaning over fictionality and someone who disappears into fictionality. The comparison of the two fictions then might offer us a glimpse into fictionality as the fundamental nature of the novel.

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