In natural discourse, decisive questions are one of the more common categories of questions; but in narrative situations, their frequency decreases somewhat (even though they are still very common). A decisive question is put by an asker to prompt a hearer to select one or more options. As a category of the logical and rhetorical use of questions, decisive questions do not come in as many varieties as the other categories do, mostly on account of decisive questions’ limited nature. In contrast to reflective questions, and much like open questions, decisive questions derive from syntax more than semantics, although pragmatics also play a critical role in the asking of decisive questions. For example:

(1) Will you get the keys from Bubba? (Decisive question)
(2) Will I get the keys from Bubba? (Decisive question)

In (1) and (2), the asker of both questions desires a response from a listener. In (2), the listener is probably the speaker, but a decision is still requested.

In direct narrative discourse, the hearer who must make a decision is the one embedded in the text. At the same time, much like reflective questions, questions with a decisive quality can also challenge a reader to reflect on and, consciously or not, make a decision based on the question asked in the text. They often persuade a listener to think on and decide on an issue or circumstance. For example, suppose within narrative discourse a reader reads:

(3) Will you ever visit Iceland? (Decisive question)

With any well-written narrative, a decisive question embedded within the narrative still prompts the reader to respond to the question during the reading process (“Yes, I will”). Therefore, while some decisive questions can approach true neutrality (informational only, with minimal leading or presuppositions), other types of decisive questions will frequently have a mild or even strong rhetorical quality.
Not all decisive questions call for a decision in the same way. For example:

(4) Will you pass the salt? (Decisive question)

(4) is an example of the classic request question.\(^1\) In natural language, when a speaker asks this question, the speaker is hoping for a request to be completed and not an answer given (not “Yes, I will pass the salt.”) However, since many modern eroteticians focus on answers, they miss the language game embedded in the question: It is a question, and it does call for a decision, whether that decision is an action or an answer, in either direction. Request questions therefore do fall within the category of decisive questions, though they do not generally carry with them a rhetorical push within the narrative for a decision by a reader. This distinction is important since our primary goal is to focus on the logical and rhetorical effects of questions in ancient narrative.

Syntax plays an important role in the determination of the interrogative quality of decisive questions. As a general rule, wh-questions are usually not decisive questions. For example:

(5) Who will win the World Series? (Open question)
(6) What clothes will you wear? (Open question)

Both (5) and (6) may appear to be decisive questions—as they ask their audience to decide on a team and decide on an outfit—but their open quality trumps their decisive quality.\(^2\) This distinction can be clearly seen in this example:

(7) Who will win the World Series? (Open question)
(8) Will the Astros win the World Series? (Decisive question)

Here (8) calls for a decision (“Yes, I think so!”), whereas (7) merely asks the listener to choose one of many options (“The Cardinals, or maybe the Red Sox.”). Also unlike open questions, decisive questions can possess either

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\(^1\) There is a great deal of debate as to whether a polite request should be counted as a question, an imperative (i.e., “Give me the salt.”), or some other type of speech-act. It is not uncommon for requests to be treated as pseudo-questions or ‘false questions’; see for example Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, 44. The reason for the debate boils down to pragmatics—different requests in different contexts will carry with them very different pragmatic forces.

\(^2\) Fales, “Phenomenology of Questions,” 73.