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Fiction and Representation

Abstract: According to artefactual theories of fiction, fictional characters are contingently existing abstract entities. One comparative advantage of artefactualism over its rivals is its conformity with our pre-theoretic views about the createdness of these entities. Artefactualism has also its own limitations: there are specific contexts in which it is apparently wrong to think that characters are created abstracta. In this paper it is argued that these limitations can be circumvented if the ontological status of characters is explained in representational terms.

Artefactual theories of fictional characters

One distinctive feature of the Artefactual Theory of Fiction is that it adopts a realist position with respect to the ontological status of fictional characters. From a realist point of view, paradigmatic literary characters are inhabitants of the actual world. Protagonists of literary works like Sherlock Holmes and Anna Karenina are taken to belong to the same fundamental ontological category as ordinary physical things like stones or lemon trees: they all are *existing* entities. Different brands of realism have provided quite different explanations for this categorial sameness. Some theorists conceived fictional characters as existing possibila, others maintained that Holmes and Karenina are person-kinds that exist in the same way as platonic eternal idealities, and they have been occasionally identified also with abstract set-correlates of properties.

Though these explanatory attempts have lead to many interesting theoretical insights, neither of them seems to correspond entirely to our folk ontological presumptions. Many of us would say, intuitively, that there is a certain point in time when fictional characters are brought into being by the creative acts of their authors, and there may come a time when they simply cease to exist, per-

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haps, when the literary works in which they appear are physically destroyed and no one remembers them any more. We tend to suppose, again intuitively, that Sherlock Holmes exists simply *because* in writing his novel *A Study in Scarlet* Arthur Conan Doyle decided to create him, and Anna Karenina exists *because* Leo Tolstoy invented her character when he started to write his famous story.

Thomasson (1999), Voltolini (2006), Goodman (2010) and other adherents of the Artefactual Theory are of the opinion that our best scientific picture of fictionality has to accommodate this folk ontological view. Given that the created-ness intuition fits smoothly into the realist ontological framework, this task can easily be carried out. The result is a view according to which fictional characters are contingently existing artefactual entities. Two further theses are implicit in this conception. First, to say that fictional characters are artefacts is equivalent to saying that they are ontologically dependent entities.[1] Sherlock Holmes, for example, depends for its existence on concrete processes and things: on the one hand, he (or it) is dependent on the mental acts Conan Doyle performed in his creative writing process; on the other hand, he (or it) is dependent on the existence of the physical copies of Conan Doyle's works. Second, if fictional characters are indeed artefacts, then the question arises of what kind of artefacts they are. The answer is fairly straightforward: because one cannot perceptually be in contact with them, and there is no concrete spatiotemporal region of our actual world where one could find them, characters of literary works must be abstract entities.[2]

The Artefactual Theory holds, then, that Sherlock Holmes, Anna Karenina and their likes are created, dependent abstracta, and as such they are part of the overall domain of what there is. If we restrict our attention to the ontological side of the problem of literary fiction, the Artefactual Theory may seem to many to be the most natural choice. It gives a consistent and positive answer concerning the existence question of fictional characters, and perhaps more importantly, it is in accordance with our pretheoretic intuitions about the created, non-concrete nature of these entities.[3]

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1 For a detailed analysis of the ontological dependence relations between fictional entities and other existent things, see Thomasson (1999). Fontaine and Rahman (2014) have recently provided a semantic account of these relations.

2 A Lewisian might object that spatially and temporally inaccessible entities are not necessarily abstract. Possible worlds construed as causally isolated concrete universes are clear counterexamples. But if we limit our art-ontological inquiry to the domain of the *actual* world, as in this study, the objection seems pointless.

3 It should be added that a Platonic realist can interpret literary characters as preexistent abstractions. On such a view, to create a character does not mean to bring it literally into existen-

But the most natural choice may be far from the best choice. The general plausibility of the artefactualist approach depends, as in other similar cases, on the relevant details of the theory. In the present context, it is of central importance for the artefactualist to identify exactly the kind of the abstract entity she talks about.[4]

Thomasson (1999, 2006) remarks, in this regard, that the traditional concrete/abstract ontological distinction works badly in the fictional realm. In the Western tradition, abstracta have been continuously thought of as eternal, necessary and causally inert entities. It follows that things with a temporal origin cannot be properly classified as abstract. Similarly, the contingent existence of a thing is typically thought to be the clearest sign of its non-abstractness. It is quite obvious, however, that fictional characters are not concrete entities. But, according to traditional classificatory criteria, they are not abstract either. So Thomasson is right in complaining that the usual concrete/abstract conceptual scheme is inappropriate for the purposes of a fictional ontology. After all, there is no *a priori* reason why these two exclusive categories cannot share certain conceptual elements. Artefactualists with a revisionist bent can freely introduce a transitional third category between concreta and abstracta. Those who have more affinity for the conceptual dualism of the ontological tradition may instead define a subcategory of abstracta that includes non-concrete but created entities. Notice, though, that both reworking strategies presuppose that the property of being a created, dependent entity is the same as the property of being a specific kind of abstracta. This is a non-trivial presupposition as there is no general consensus among artefactualists on the correct definition of the dependence base of fictional characters. Hence, it is not entirely clear what kind of abstracta fictional characters are supposed to be.

A number of attempts have been made to clarify the issue. Thomasson's (1999) preferred view seems to be that fictional characters belong to a class of entities that may be called comprehensively socio-cultural constructs. National institutions, laws and marriages are among the clearest examples of these constructs. A common feature of the members of this class is that they have quite minimal existence conditions (i. e. dependence bases). For example, to bring into existence a fictional character, it is enough if the following two conditions

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ce. It means rather to make certain stipulations that serve to describe it. For detailed arguments, see Deutsch (1991).

4 Abstracta are often subdivided into two classes: that of abstract particulars and abstract universals. In using the expression 'the kind of the abstract entity', I don't want to refer to this subdivision. Rather, I will allude to the observation that differently created abstracta may have different dependence bases. For more about this, see the remainder of this section.

are satisfied: (i) the author of a fictional work *F* must perform a creative intentional act that is directed toward a previously non-existent object, and (ii) the sentence corresponding to the creative act of the author must be included in the set of sentences composing *F*.[5] Thomasson is persuaded that fictional characters and other socio-cultural constructs "can be brought into existence merely by being represented as existing".[6] One should not misinterpret this by thinking that Sherlock Holmes is a mere representation. Rather, Thomasson's view is that the abstract entity Holmes is dependent ontologically on a certain set of mental and linguisitc representations.

A related account is adopted by Manning (2014). Manning is not explicitly committed to the Artefactual Theory, but like Thomasson and other artefactualists, he regards fictional characters as created entities. Literary works, he claims, represent their natives because our *cultural conventions* bestow them with this representational property. Conventions of this sort are operative on two levels at once: they generate conditions for creating fictional entities and determine the features that are needed for literary works to represent their natives. This may be taken as a promising explanation of why one can conceive Sherlock Holmes at the same time as a fictional character and a detective. Manning's account is rather sketchy, but his basic idea seems to be that, first, the existence of abstract fictional entities is dependent on a set of conventions that are operative in a given cultural environment. Second, the set of conventions in question may be held to be responsible for the fact that fictional entities have *real* representations in literary works.

A more complicated account is put forward by Voltolini (2006), who gives an in-depth analysis of the compatibility between the Artefactual Theory and its pretense-theoretic and Neo-Meinongian rivals. Fictional characters, argues Voltolini, have a twofold ontological dependence structure. One part of this structure is the particular *de dicto* make-believe process-type that is mobilized or instantiated in the activity of authorial creation. The other part consists of certain properties internally predicated of the fictional character in that very activity. For instance, in writing his novel, Arthur Conan Doyle pretended in his individual way that there is a person denoted by the proper name 'Sherlock Holmes' and simultaneously predicated a number of properties – such as *being talented*, *living at 221B Baker Street*, *being a pipe-smoker*, etc. – about this pretended person. The result of this ontologically creative authorial activity is an abstract en-

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5 If a fictional character has been successfully created, it has also a generic persistence condition for its existence. Characters can persist only if there exists at least one copy of the work that mentions them.
6 Thomasson (1999, 13).

tity, Holmes, constituted by an instantiated make-believe process-type and a set of properties. For Voltolini, the final concequence to be drawn from this line of thought is that fictional characters are a kind of *compound abstractum*.

I do not want to suggest that there is a common conceptual or theoretical deficiency in the above-mentioned accounts and thus one or more of them are seriously flawed. Instead, I will merely try to argue in the remainder of this paper for a hitherto overlooked alternative – an alternative to which one may adhere on the grounds of its simplicity and explanatory power.

Representationalism: an overlooked alternative

Presumably, all adherents of the Artefactual Theory will agree that the process of authorial creation consists of two essential components: the mental act of inventing a new literary character and the corresponding sentence token that expresses the content of the mental act in a physical format. These two components are arguably indispensable for creating a fictional character, though other subsidiary factors may also simultaneously be involved. Opinions begin to diverge, however, when one asks what kind of abstract entity is the final output of the process of creation. As we have seen, possible candidates include sociocultural abstracta, conventionally bestowed properties and compound abstract entities.

A further candidate comes to mind, if it is recognized that the linguistic component has a certain methodological priority in studying the process of authorial creation. Proper names of literary characters have their primary empirically accessible occurrences in authorial manuscripts. Many of them occur later in the same orthographic form in published literary texts. The methodological emphasis is on the term 'occurrence'. The term serves here as a warning that there is only just one way to fix our thoughts about literary characters, namely, the way of reading manuscripts or published texts into which their proper names have been introduced.[7] This means that all of our various thoughts and beliefs about characters can be traced back, ultimately, to our reading experiences with these texts.

If the above observation is on the right track, and there are no possible text-independent sources of our knowledge of literary characters, then it is advi-

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7 Of course, not all literary characters have proper names. Many of them are introduced and individuated only by descriptive phrases. I put aside such cases for now because their proper treatment would lead to unnecessary complications.

sable to focus our attention on the linguistic component of the process of authorial creation.

Let us begin with the sentence token that contains the first occurrence of Arthur Conan Doyle's famous literary character:

(1) Sherlock Holmes smokes a pipe.[8]

As a written token, (1) is a composite concrete entity: it is a series of ink marks on a particular sheet of paper. It is more than obvious, however, that Conan Doyle was not specifically interested in creating such a concrete artefact. His purpose was instead to bring into existence a well-formed sequence of English words, that is, a linguistic entity endowed with syntactic and semantic properties. The concreteness of the ink marks on the paper is therefore a necessary but unimportant feature of (1).

In contrast, the syntactic order of the component words is an important feature of (1) because it reveals, among other things, that 'Sherlock Holmes' functions as the external argument of the verb 'smokes'. It is also made manifest by the syntactic structure of (1) that 'Sherlock Holmes' fulfills this function as a proper name. Moreover, as we well know from literary history, it is a proper name that has never been used before (1) was tokened.

The semantic consequences arising from this situation may seem a bit perplexing. If 'Sherlock Holmes' is a newly created proper name, then how could its semantic profile be portrayed? Artefactualists had better reject the assumption that 'Sherlock Holmes' denotes a previously nonexistent literary character, as they identify characters with abstract entities and this would lead inevitably to a category mistake. It would be preposterous to say that Conan Doyle's sentence token expresses a statement about an abstract entity since abstract entities do not have the habit of smoking pipes.[9]

The other possible hypothesis is that 'Sherlock Holmes' behaves in (1) as a non-denoting proper name. Artefactualists might try to argue that Conan Doyle has written down (1) in a non-assertive style. Perhaps he has merely pretended to assert that a certain person smokes a pipe.[10] And in the scope of Doyle's authorial pretense, the argument might continue, 'Sherlock Holmes' functions as a non-denoting expression. But this cannot be the final word on the matter.

8 The first sentential occurrence of 'Sherlock Holmes' in Doyle's oeuvre is to be find in his *A Study in Scarlet,* page 5: "You don't know Sherlock Holmes yet". For the sake of the argumentation, I have modified this historical datum.

9 This potential problem is discussed at length in Sainsbury (2010).

10 As we have seen, Voltolini (2006) adopts an artefactualist approach which is based, in part, on pretense-theoretic terms. For another pretense-friendly view, see Thomasson (2003).

In speaking about Sherlock Holmes, artefactualists, like everyone else, participate in a venerable proper-name-using practice that has its historical origin in the circumstances under which (1) was tokened. Using the name as if it were a genuine denoting expression means a radical divergence from this practice. Artefactualists do exactly that when they make such statements as 'Sherlock Holmes has been created by Doyle' and 'Sherlock Holmes is an abstract artefact'. But then some further explanation is needed of what enables the denoting use of literary proper names. And even if such an explanation were available to the artefactualist, that won't bring us much closer to the understanding of the semantic profile of (1).

What really requires an explanation is the ability of a sentence token like (1) to serve as a means for creating an abstract entity. The problem such an explanation faces is that 'Sherlock Holmes' operates in our example as a proper name, and proper names are thought to be best modeled by using a denotational semantics. The semantics of denotation allows only committing interpretations of proper names: 'Sherlock Holmes' either denotes something or else it denotes nothing. We have already seen, however, that the first option poses an interpretive difficulty for the artefactualist: if the name denotes an abstractum, then the sentence is nonsensical because abstracta are not pipe-smokers. The second option is also unattractive: if the name denotes nothing, then it remains unclear how we–readers of Doyle's novel–can use it to make meaningful statements about the character.

The alternative approach I want to propose here is to think of the semantics of (1) as free from ontological commitment. On my view, a suitable reading of (1) is not compelled to try to associate 'Sherlock Holmes' with a text-independent entity (or the absence of thereof). To be fully interpretable, a fictional proper name need not be related to any real existing entity, concrete or abstract, that might qualify as its semantic value. Interpretability requires only that there be an elementary semantic function for such names – a function that is presumably shared by all proper names, fictional and nonfictional alike. This is the function of non-relational representation. The term itself is not an ad hoc invention. In recent years, various attempts have been made in the relevant literature to develop a non-relational interpretation of representation. For example, Burge (2010) points out that representation can transpire even in cases where there is nothing that could be represented. In Burge's jargon, representing is always representing-as-of. A predicate or a proper name X has this underlying structure independently of whether there is a candidate for being a representatum of X. Sainsbury (2012) is of a similar opinion when he says that from the claim that 'X represents Y' it does not follow that there is something, Y, that X represents.

In this sense of the term, representing Holmes is not equivalent with expressing a singular proposition containing Holmes as a constituent. A sentence token can represent Holmes as a smoker even if there is no such person as Holmes.[11] It can be said then that Conan Doyle's sentence token represents Sherlock Holmes as being a certain way. More concretely, it represents him (or it) as smoking a pipe. And it does so wholly independently of the ontological status of Sherlock Holmes.

Admittedly, saying that 'Sherlock Holmes' represents Sherlock Holmes non-relationally sounds a bit misleading because it may give rise to the deceiving appearance of an actually existing, text-independent entity. And this would suggest that fictional proper names do involve ontological commitment, contrary to what we have said previously about the function of non-relational representation. To circumvent this difficulty, it would be more convenient to say that 'Sherlock Holmes', as it occurs in (1), delivers a simple non-relational Holmes-representation. And it may be said that the sentence token (1), as a whole, delivers a complex or structured Holmes-representation. The advantage of this terminological move is that it helps to avoid unwanted ontological implications.

Two aspects of this account of representation should be mentioned with respect to the alternative I set forth. First, given that 'Sherlock Holmes' is a syntactically founded proper name, the simple Holmes-representation depends constitutively on the syntax of (1). The syntactic structure of (1), in turn, has a necessary physical dependence base. 'Sherlock Holmes' would not exist as a syntactic proper name without the presence of the concrete ink marks on the paper. Second, the semantic significance of (1) is determined by the elementary function of non-relational representation. Doyle's sentence token delivers a complex Holmes-representation, a meaningful semantic unit, without raising the need for relating the parts of that representation to entities and properties that exist outside of it.

Seen from the point of view of the Artefactual Theory, this is a remarkable result. I have tried to point out that the first publicly accessible occurrence of the literary character Sherlock Holmes has a physical dependence base where the adjectival qualifier 'physical' should be taken in the most mundane sense.

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11 Consider a non-fictional variant of (1): 'Günther Grass smokes a pipe'. It is by no means uncommon to think that at the elementary semantic level, where 'Günther Grass' is determined to be a meaningful (token) proper name, representation functions non-relationally. 'Günther Grass' can be conceived as a denoting name only if the particular facts surrounding its historical introduction have already been taken into consideration. For a related idea, see Barker (2004).

In fact, the role of physical constraints on character creation have been empha-sized several times in the literature from Thomasson (1999) onwards. Perhaps this is sufficient to explain why literary characters ought to be understood as artefacts, but not to explain what kind of artefacts they are.

On my view, the latter question can only be answered by providing a se-mantic account of the primary textual occurrences of literary characters. The first step in this direction is to realize, as above, that writing down (or uttering) a sentence containing the proper name of a previously non-existent person (or place) is to create a publicly accessible character. And to create a publicly ac-cessible character, in this sense, is the same as to create a publicly accessible self-standing representation.

Note that we are still within the standard boundaries of the artefactualist framework: Sherlock Holmes, Anna Karenina and their likes are treated as cre-ated, dependent abstracta. But it seems that at this point there is nothing that would force us to go beyond the immediately available data sources.[12] We may identify the final output of the process of authorial creation in accordance with the above-mentioned methodological priority of empirical accessibility. That is, if literary characters are indeed to be identified with a certain kind of created abstracta, then the most direct and the most plausible view is that they are brought into existence as instances of publicly accessible representations. And given the non-relational and self-standing nature of these representations, they may ultimately be categorized as purely semantic entities.

As we have seen above, Thomasson, Voltolini, and others who sympathize with the Artefactual Theory, are in agreement concerning the ontological status of fictional objects. It is also commonly accepted that the existence conditions of characters include certain sentence tokens produced by the authors of lit-erary texts. But the representational properties of these sentence tokens are not supposed to play a constitutive role in the ontological part of the theory. This has a peculiar consequence. Characters become accessible to us because we can grasp and understand the meaning of certain authorial words and sen-tences. What we understand through reading are, of course, abstract representa-tions. Why not stop here? It is far from being self-evident why other kinds of abstracta such as socio-cultural constructs or compound abstracta should be in-troduced into the artefactualist's ontology. Those who identify characters with

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12 According to an influential view within theoretical linguistics, data are statements that sup-ply plausibility values to theories. Initial plausibility values depend, in turn, on the weighing of the reliability of the data sources. Presumably, this type of framework could also be fruitfully applied to the exploration of fictional representations. For a systematic overview of this theme, see Kertész and Rákosi (2012).

such putatively extra objects owe us an explanation of why it is sensible to neglect the level of linguistic representations. Unfortunately, so far neither Voltolini nor Thomasson have attempted to explain the theoretical motives behind their stance. I think the present proposal is in a better position in this regard, as the epistemic role linguistic representations play in our literary practices is relatively well understood.

A possible objection at this juncture comes from the perspective of intentionality. If literary characters are nothing more than mere representations, and intentional acts are necessarily directed at something, then Conan Doyle's intentional act of inventing Sherlock Holmes must have been directed at an abstract entity. But it is very unlikely that Doyle has mentally represented Holmes as a mere abstractum before (1) has been written down. The reason for this is that a mental Holmes-representation would certainly be *not* semantic in nature. Holmes would be a geniune semantic representation only if Doyle's intentional act were directed at the semantic content of the mental analogue of (1). For this to be the case, however, the mental analogue of (1) must have been already brought about by a separate creative act. And this seems to undermine the claim that Sherlock Holmes was originally created as a purely semantic entity.

In response to this objection, one might point out that it is not mandatory to accept the view according to which object-directedness is an intrinsic feature of every intentional state. An adverbial theorist would maintain, for instance, that in cases of creative thinking, intentional acts do not have to be related to any (concrete or abstract) entity.[13] Instead of being directed toward something, the distinguishing feature of ontologically productive acts is that they are performed in an adverbial manner. Thus Doyle's mental activity may be reconstructed as thinking in a Sherlock-Holmes-wise manner or, more exactly, as thinking in a Sherlock-Holmes-smokes-a-pipe-wise manner. Adopting an idea from Kriegel (2008), we may also conjecture that to perform an act in this manner is to be in a mental state that has a "Holmesque" functional or initiative role. The point of this response is, then, that Doyle's intentional state counts as the mental birth place of Sherlock Holmes not because it is directed in some way toward an entity, but because it a can be used to initiate a non-relational Holmes-representation in a public language. The act of writing down (1) might be seen, therefore, as one of the possible physical realizations of the "Holmesque" role.

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13 See, among others, Rapaport (1979), Gorman (2006) and Kriegel (2008, 2011).

Resolving the conflict between mutually exclusive perspectives

The Artefactual Theory is often criticized for being unable to provide an unified account of literary discourse.[14] Consider a classroom context where the following sentence is tokened:

(2)   Sherlock Holmes was created by Conan Doyle.

In contrast to (1), which is a proper part of the fictional text, (2) involves an extra-fictional perspective of talking. As noted earlier, artefactualists should reject the view according to which 'Sherlock Holmes' denotes an abstract entity in (1). This is not so in the case of (2): (2) informs us about the creation of a literary character and because literary characters are taken by artefactualists to be abstract entities, 'Sherlock Holmes' should denote here an abstractum.

The denotational differences between intra-fictional and extra-fictional uses of 'Sherlock Holmes' may be explained in a variety of ways. Perhaps (1) and (2) attribute different kinds of property to the abstract entity Holmes (Parsons, 1980); or maybe the same kind of property is attributed to Holmes in both cases but (1) and (2) differ in their mode of predication (Voltolini, 2006). Thomasson (2010) would alternatively argue that (1) established a name-using tradition into which 'Sherlock Holmes' had been introduced as a proper name of a person. Those speakers who engage in this tradition use the name in this sense. But by knowing that there is no such person as Holmes, they only pretend to make genuine assertions about "him".[15] Later, when other speakers begin to refer back to these pretenseful assertions a new tradition emerges in which the name is used to denote a literary character rather than a person. (2) belongs to this reflectively grounded tradition, and that is a sufficient explanation of why its constituent name denotes an abstract entity.[16]

The main thrust of the opponents' criticism is that all of these explanatory strategies postulate an artificial ambiguity in the semantics (or pragmatics) of

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[14] For recent criticism of this kind, see Sainsbury (2010) and Everett (2013).

[15] Thomasson (2010) seems to be inclined to say that speakers in such cases engage in a *de dicto* pretense.

[16] Note that Thomasson offered earlier a Lewisian solution to bridge the extra-fictional/intra-fictional semantic gap. On that view, extra-fictional sentences ought to be taken at face value, and intra-fictional sentences are to be understood as if they were embedded under the implicit intensional operator 'according to the (relevant) fiction F'. For details, cf. Thomasson (1999). But note also that Sainsbury has recently provided powerful arguments against all versions of the operator view. See Sainsbury (2014).

literary names. If artefactualists are right, then the syntactic proper name 'Sherlock Holmes' must be disambiguated in every particular case of use before anything interesting could be said with it. It is questionable, however, whether our discursive practices exert such a disambiguating pressure on us. Probably, very few speakers would be willing to admit that the following sentences are separated by a perspective change:

(3) Sherlock Holmes was created by Conan Doyle. And don't forget that Sherlock Holmes used to smoke a pipe.

We may grant that the phenomenon lying behind (3) is general enough to be considered as a piece of evidence against the validity of the artefactualist's intra-fictional/extra-fictional distinction. This is not necessarily a fatal problem for the Artefactual Theory, though. The key point is, I must stress again, that we have to find the most simple and most plausible candidate for answering the question concerning the ontological nature of characters.

An advantage of identifying characters with non-relational representations is that it allows us to give an account for the smooth transition between the first and the second sentence in (3) without forcing us to reject the basic assumptions of the Artefactual Theory. In saying that Conan Doyle was the creator of Sherlock Holmes, we may be taken to convey the information that the first publicly accessible Holmes-representation was created by Conan Doyle. And in reminding others of the smoking habits of Holmes, we may be seen as calling attention to a set of sentences which represent Holmes as being a certain way, namely, as being a pipe-smoker. It is difficult to find here any clear indication for a perspective change. Nor is there any sign of pretense. The common feature connecting the content of these sentences is rather that both are designed to deliver us a particular Holmes-representation.

A serious semantic analysis of (3) would require much more than providing an informal paraphrase like the one given above, but the overall shape of the argument is hopefully clear: if we accept the view according to which characters are semantic entities (i. e. non-relational representations) and hold that all the content of our statements about these semantic entities can be traced back to the literary texts where they originated, then a sharp terminological distinction between intra-fictional and extra-fictional discourses will become superfluous.

In closing

Though I am fairly well convinced that adopting the present version of the Arte-factual Theory may lead to a simpler and more uniform treatment of fictional discourse, some important details may be lacking. Certainly, the most pressing question that would have to be asked concerns the problem of negative existentials. Can the present theory provide an account for the meaning of sentences like 'Sherlock Holmes does not exist'? I am inclined to answer this question with a hesitating yes. The reason for my hesitance is that it would be clearly insufficient merely to claim that 'Sherlock Holmes' stands for a Holmes-representation in a nonexistence statement as we do not want to deny the existence of such representations. To succeed, an additional move is needed.

Predicating the nonexistence of Holmes, I think, would lose its paradoxical flavor if we interpreted it as a covert metalinguistic speech act.[17] By this interpretation, to say that Holmes does not exist is equivalent (or nearly equivalent) to denying that the proper name 'Sherlock Holmes' is capable of denoting a text-independent entity. And this, in turn, is equivalent (or nearly equivalent) to denying the existence of relational Holmes-representations. If we are aware that the name 'Sherlock Holmes' was originally tokened in a context of a literary work and know that our current discursive practices about Holmes can be traced back to that context, we may deny the possibility of such representations.[18]

The cogency of this type of reasoning depends on whether negative existentials are used standardly to convey metalinguistic information. Perhaps existential contexts always induce a certain kind of metalinguistic ascent, regardless of the semantic status of the names being involved. If this is so, the sentence 'Banksy exists' may be interpreted as conveying information both about the putative bearer of the name and about the name itself. On the one hand, in uttering the sentence, we assert that the bearer of the name 'Banksy' is included in the overall inventory of what there is; on the other hand, we assert that the name is capable of denoting a text-independent entity. One possible explana-

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17 As is perhaps well-known, Kripke (2013) offered a variety of arguments against the metalinguistic interpretation of negative existentials. The basic target of his critique was what might be called the simple metalinguistic approach. According to this, the sentence 'N does not exist' means nothing more than that 'N' has no referent. I think Kripke is right in rejecting the simple approach, but, as I try to suggest below, there is an improved variant of the metalinguistic interpretation that is immune to his criticism.
18 Of course, you might decide to use 'Sherlock Holmes' to denote a text-independent entity, for example your dog. But in this case you would establish a new name-using practice for an extant name that, because of its non-fictional characteristics, would require a separate treatment.

tion for the presence of the latter information may be that in to apply the predicate 'exist' to an entity, one must be in a position to know something about the origin of the name of that entity. The clarification of the source and scope of this epistemic liability, however, awaits further analysis.

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