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# FICTIONAL CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERISATIONS

BY

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**Abstract:** Realists about fictional characters posit a certain theoretical role and a candidate to fill this role. I will delineate the role realists take fictional characters like Emma Woodhouse to fill, and I will argue that it is better filled by what I will call 'characterisations'. In explaining what I mean by 'characterisations', I will show that the existence of these entities is comparatively uncontroversial. Realists should acknowledge their existence, but doing so, I will argue, obviates the need to acknowledge the existence of Emma and other fictional individuals.

## *1. Introduction*

A comment like 'Mr Toad resided at Toad Hall', made in the telling of a story, is plausibly understood as a pretend assertion rather than an assertion. But a comment like 'the character of Obadiah Slope is Trollope's finest comic creation', made by a literary critic, is plausibly understood as asserting a truth about a 'theoretical entit[y] of literary criticism'.[1]

Literary critics make claims 'about fictional characters' that seem to be true but whose truth or acceptability appears to require the existence of a particular type of theoretical entity. The mistake that realists about fictional characters (by which I mean, theorists who accept the existence of Slope, Toad, Emma Woodhouse and other alleged referents of fictional names[2])

[1]Van Inwagen (1977, p. 302).

[2]Note that Meinongian/noneist views, which take fictional names to denote *non-existent* objects, are excluded as realist by this definition. I will have more to say about these views below.

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make, I will argue, is their identification of Slope, Toad, Emma and their ilk as the required theoretical entities. There is no need to make this identification. There are (comparatively) uncontroversial entities that can serve as the required theoretical entities of literary criticism: what I will call 'characterisations'.

In Section 2, I will look at the sorts of claims critics make about the relevant theoretical entities that define the theoretical role these entities play and thus delimit the candidates for this role. In Section 3, I will explain what I mean by 'characterisations'. In the process, I will show that the existence of these entities is comparatively uncontroversial: both realists and anti-realists about fictional characters should admit the existence of characterisations. Characterisations come for free (or very nearly), and I will argue in Section 4, they are a good fit for the theoretical role that I posit them to fill.

In Section 4, I will also argue that many realist candidates are a bad fit. Some realist candidates are not a bad fit. The main mistake the proponents of these candidates (Voltolini 2006; Evnine 2016) make, I will maintain, is being realists. I will champion my own candidate as the best fit. But I want to give credit to realist views that, as I see it, get something right. I will also in this section give credit to anti-realist views that get something else right. Namely, those that – despite denying the existence of Emma and Toad – identify the need to posit a specific sort of theoretical entity (beyond novels, plots etc.) that fictional character-talk is *about*. These anti-realist views are the closest antecedents to my view.

It is possible to distinguish three types of realist argument.[3] One type of argument looks at a body of truth-oriented discourse and argues that these truths require the existence of fictional characters. This sort of argument is my main concern. I maintain that if theoretical truths 'about fictional characters' require us to posit theoretical entities then it is not fictional individuals like Emma and Toad, but rather characterisations, that they require us to posit: these are less controversial and they better fit the theoretical role.

In Section 5, I will consider the other two realist arguments. One of these arguments suggests that Mr Toad's existence conditions are so easily met that Mr Toad himself (or rather itself) comes for free. I will show that this suggestion is implausible if Mr Toad is taken to be something over and above the characterisation as of a dilettantish talking toad created by Kenneth Grahame. The other argument, I will maintain, is better understood as an argument for non-existent intentional objects. The conclusion I wish you to draw is that positing characterisations obviates the need to grant the existence of fictional individuals like Emma and Toad.

[3]Cf. Friend (2007, pp. 147–140).

## 2. The theoretical role

We may speak of 'theoretical entities of literary criticism' in the same vein as 'theoretical entities of physics' insofar as each discipline's vocabulary includes terms that feature primarily in claims about the subject matter of the discipline and that are used to state hypotheses that are true only if the terms' extensions are non-empty. The counterparts of the physicists' electrons, gluons, forces and charges are the likes of 'plots, subplots, novels (as opposed to tangible copies of novels), poems, meters, rhyme schemes, borrowings, influences, digressions, episodes, recurrent patterns of imagery, and literary forms ("the novel", "the sonnet")'(Van Inwagen 1977, pp. 302–303) …. And the items that are at issue when claims are made about 'fictional characters'. Film and theatre critics invoke many of the same theoretical entities. Beyond the ranks of professional critics, reflective readers and audiences invoke these entities in essaying hypotheses about 'the nature, content and value of literary works' (Van Inwagen 1977, p. 303) and of works of fiction more generally.

What are the sorts of hypotheses that define the theoretical role that fictional characters are posited to fill? For one, what I will call 'creation hypotheses': hypotheses that concern and assume the creation of the entities that fill the role, like the hypothesis stated by (1).

(1) 'Obadiah Slope is Trollope's finest comic creation'.

Judgements like that expressed by (2) comprise a further class of hypotheses.

(2) 'Emma Woodhouse is a more complex character than Fanny Price'.

This type of judgement concerns compound entities, which can be more or less complex or 'well-developed': more 'round' or more 'flat', as critics, following E. M. Forster, would put it. I will employ the term 'complexity hypotheses' for judgements about levels of complexity or development.

Another class of hypotheses concern the 'verisimilitude' or 'believability' of the entities in question. Verisimilitude hypotheses are not unrelated to complexity hypotheses. Typically, complexity and degree of development enhance believability. Verisimilitude hinges on which properties are associated with the entities. The number and variety of associated properties also inform hypotheses about complexity/level of 'development'.

A fourth class of judgements contains judgements – let me call these 'property hypotheses' – that explicitly associate properties with the entities in question. Property hypotheses are often made with one foot in the fiction, as it were. One can venture a hypothesis about the properties associated with

a theoretical entity of literary criticism by making as if to talk about the properties instantiated by a real person, for example, 'an important thing to remember about Emma is that for all her intelligence she has very little experience'. I will say more below – drawing on Kendall Walton – about how I think this is done. Meinongians of course take property hypotheses literally; but in line with most realists, I will take these claims to concern the properties associated with or involved in theoretical entities, rather than the properties *instantiated* by individuals.[4]

Creationists about fictional characters (e.g. Kripke 2013; Thomasson 1999; Van Inwagen 1977) make much of their accounts' ability to explain creation hypotheses. But the explanation of verisimilitude hypotheses, complexity hypotheses and property hypotheses is of no less importance. Aesthetic evaluations hinge on these types of hypothesis. Given that aesthetic evaluation is a primary goal of critical discourse, any attempt to delineate the theoretical role I have been trying to delineate must put these hypotheses and the assumptions that underlie them centre stage.

I will do this. The account I will develop grants that the theoretical entities invoked by what I will call 'fictional character-talk' are created. It further grants that they are associated with collections of properties, and the natures of these collections ground further truths about them, including truths about how complex or well developed they are.

There is one further noteworthy point about the theoretical role at issue. Either the discourse that defines the role is confused or there are *two* related roles that need to be distinguished. Contrast, on the one hand, fictional character-talk that uses proper names like 'Emma Woodhouse' to allude to the object of discussion and credits the creation of 'characters' to specific authors, with, on the other hand, talk of, for example, 'the character of the femme fatale'. The latter sort of talk purports to concern something generic, not specific, and not necessarily attributable to a single author.[5] Property claims and complexity claims feature in this sort of talk; verisimilitude claims feature less prominently. Rather than positing an irresolvable confusion, I will take it that there are two roles to fill, and in Section 3, I will suggest suitable occupants for each.

The theoretical role or roles that this section has been attempting to delineate are defined by fictional character-talk. Utterances that seem to posit 'fictional characters' must be the guide to what it is that is being posited. It is of course essential to distinguish apparent attempts to refer to or quantify over 'fictional characters' that genuinely aim at imparting truths about the

[4]For criticisms of Meinongian 'literalism' about fictional character talk, see Sainsbury (2010, pp. 26–31).

[5]See Lamarque (2010, pp. 190–193) for a discussion of generic 'character types'.

theoretical entities they posit, from the mere pretend assertions of storytellers. It is only the former that define theoretical entities. But treating instances of fictional character-talk with the degree of seriousness that each merits is complicated by the fact that fictional character-talk is often playful even when it is serious. Takashi Yagisawa (2001, p. 165) casts doubt on the methodology of creationist accounts of fictional characters with examples such as (3)

(3) 'Dickens created Mrs Gamp as a fat old woman who is fond of gin'.

Taken literally, as creationists tend to take creation hypotheses, an utterance of (3) entails that Dickens was a real-life Dr Frankenstein: the creator of a woman. And (3) isn't an aberration. As Stacie Friend puts it 'pretense pervades all kinds of fictional discourse' (Friend 2007, p. 152).[6] Consider the following typical attempt to define 'fictional character': 'A person portrayed in a novel, a drama, etc.; a part played by an actor'.[7] This defines fictional characters as persons. Given that there is no such person as Emma Woodhouse, we cannot take even this definition literally as the definition of a type of existing entity.

There is an evident need to adopt a strategy that has been urged as appropriate to the interpretation of Donald Trump's pronouncements[8] and take utterances like (3) seriously but not literally. Here are some more examples of fictional character-talk that demand this interpretative strategy.

(4) 'Little Orphan Annie has been eight years old for over forty years' (Walton 1990, p. 407)
(5) 'Tolkien's characters come to life on the page but die on the screen'

Kendall Walton's account of what is going on in cases like these is very plausible. Walton takes appreciators of fiction to be participants in games of *prop-based make-believe*. A work of fiction is a prop that facilitates certain imaginings, as the *Star Wars* saga facilitates imagining a struggle between good and evil a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. The rules of the 'official' game of make-believe associated with *Star Wars* mandate imagining just this. One can utter or form the thought 'the Sith Lords are evil' merely as a form of pretence, in line with the rules of the game. One

[6]See also Pelletier (2003, p. 199).

[7]Trumble, William R, and Angus Stevenson, ed. (2002). Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 381.

[8]'Taking Trump Seriously, Not Literally', Salena Zito, *The Atlantic* September 23, 2016. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/trump-makes-his-case-in-pittsburgh/501335/.

can also utter this sentence informatively, as a means of demonstrating, by example, what is permitted in the game, and thereby conveying a real truth about the prop that facilitates the game: about the *Star Wars* saga, that is.

Examples like (4) and (5) for Walton are similar and also dissimilar to the case of an informative utterance of 'the Sith Lords are evil'. They are similar in that they are moves in games of make-believe whose purpose is to draw attention to precisely the features of the 'props' that, under the rules of the games, authorise such moves. They are dissimilar in that the games being played in these cases are examples of ad hoc, 'unofficial' games. Some, like (4), draw on features of the prop that official games ignore. But these differences only serve to illustrate the underlying unity of the types of discourse covered by Walton's explanation.

Something like Walton's account can be invoked to explain how serious claims about the occupant of the theoretical role at issue are made in a playful way. It will be my contention that typically, serious claims about these theoretical entities are expressed with one foot in the fiction.

This contention is hard to deny. But I will also point out – in Section 4 – instances in which serious truth-oriented claims of the sort that define the role are expressed non-playfully via literal statements of fact about what I will call 'characterisations'. I will use these examples to defend my nomination of characterisations as the best candidates for the role. But I also invoke these statements to ward off any suggestion from anti-realists that Walton's account enables us not only to '[do] without fictitious entities' (Walton 1990, p. 385) but to do without even the theoretical role that realists posit fictional entities to fill. There is a theoretical role that needs to be filled, but my candidates to fill it – characterisations – are entities of a type that anti-realists like Walton can comfortably accommodate alongside such familiar 'props' and features of props as films, authors, influences, plots, rhyme schemes and the rest.

## *3. Characterisations*

A characterisation in the usual sense of the word is something like a description. If a characterisation is conceived of as a proposition or a propositional function or a set of properties, then it is incorrect to say that a characterisation is something that an author can create.[9] But I will use 'characterisation'

[9]That's assuming that propositions and propositional functions are timeless or eternal existents. But see Soames, Scott (2019) for a contrary view of propositions. In fact, if Soames is right about propositions, then a characterisation as I'll define it *is* something like a proposition.

in a different sense; if no such sense attached to the term before then I will be giving it a new sense. A characterisation in this sense is, as I will explain, something that can be created. It is something that is put together by an author.

Consider the properties *has red hair, is a sycophant, is a clergyman, is called 'Obadiah Slope'* … bound to each other by a relation whose obtaining depends on it being represented[10] that an entity instantiates the properties. For the moment, take the relation in question to be the relation … *have been represented by Anthony Trollope as co-instantiated* …. A characterisation in the sense I will use the word is a structure comprising of properties bound by such a relation.[11]

Unlike the set whose members are these properties and this relation, the structure comprising of these properties bound by this relation – the relation of being represented by Trollope as co-instantiated – would not exist were it not for Anthony Trollope's fiction-making efforts: Trollope had to represent the properties as co-instantiates for the relation to obtain. And so this structure – the Obadiah Slope-characterisation, I'll call it – can

[10]'Represented' is intended to cover representation in a mental representation. I see no need to posit an essential difference between characterisations that become part (as it were) of works of fiction, and those that 'don't make it to the page'. The former gain a property that the latter lack, but this need not be a property that defines a new kind. Note though that arguably, 'represented' should also cover representations that aren't mental. Imagine a fiction generated by a computer programme following a fiction-generating algorithm. It strikes me as completely proper to distinguish the characterisations created by the programme (if this is done in the usual way, by making as if to distinguish 'characters' or people and things that 'appear in the story').

[11]What properties exactly – beyond those mentioned above – are included in the Slope-characterisation? My thought is that the Slope-characterisation comprises all properties directly relevant to the sorts of claims critics make (e.g. complexity claims) about 'the character of Slope'. These would include intrinsic properties, and also relational properties whose possession by an individual depends on the individual's intrinsic properties (and does not depend on the existence of something that doesn't exist). The property of having met Gladstone, and the property of lusting after a woman called 'Signora Neroni' are properties of appropriate sorts; the property of being such that England has a temperate climate, and the property of having met Sherlock Holmes (if there is such a property) are not. Which properties are directly relevant to critics' claims about 'the character of X' depends on what participants in 'official' games of make-believe associated with works of fiction are mandated to imagine. A complication – noted below – is that there is more than one type of official game and this may make for more than one type of characterisation (in the terminology employed below for both work specific and evolving characterisations). A question also arises concerning cases where it is disputable what the official game is – that is, it is disputable how participants are mandated to imagine. Readers of Dante's *Inferno* are mandated to imagine that Hell has an occupant called 'Count Ugolino' whose mortal misadventures ended in a prison cell together with his children and without any food. The wording of Canto XXXIII is notoriously ambiguous. It is unclear whether readers are mandated to imagine that the words 'And then the hunger had more Power than even sorrow over me' are an admission that the Count cannibalised his children, or merely an admission that it was hunger rather than grief that killed the Count. Is the property of being a cannibal included in the Ugolino characterisation? I would be inclined to side with Borges (1999) in denying that either this property or the property of being a non-cannibal is part of the Ugolino-characterisation. But the option is also available in the case of 'ambiguous characters' of distinguishing multiple characterisations corresponding to the multiple competing interpretations 'of the character'.

properly be counted as Trollope's creation. This characterisation came into existence when Trollope engaged in a specific sort of imaginative activity.

It is a consequence of the definition of 'characterisation' that characterisations, if they exist, are created. Another consequence worth noting is that the Slope-characterisation familiar to readers of *Barchester Towers* – individuated as it is by Trollope's act of representation – is a distinct entity to a characterisation that involves the same properties but is due to a different author. I find this consequence congenial, but readers who feel otherwise may prefer a modified definition of 'characterisation'. There is scope for the development of a range of similar but distinct alternatives to my preferred account.[12]

The existence of the Slope-characterisation is comparatively uncontroversial. It is comparatively uncontroversial that there is such a structure. So long as Trollope represented certain properties as co-instantiated, the structure in question, bound by the relation in question, exists. Granted, it exists only if there are such things as the property of having red hair; so a commitment to characterisations involves a commitment to properties. But a commitment to characterisations doesn't involve a commitment to any particular theory of properties. It is thus compatible with those varieties of nominalism that define properties as comparatively uncontroversial sorts of entities.[13]

[12]A case which has proved puzzling for other accounts, and which a reviewer requested I mention, is the case in which an author introduces two fictional individuals at the same time (as say 'the twins') and says exactly the same things about them throughout the story. In such a case, readers are enjoined to imagine two individuals, but on the other hand, it would be quite natural for a critic to say something like 'the twins are not really separate characters: they are one composite character'. This assessment – which I take to be making the point that the author has provided a single twins-characterisation – seems correct to me. And doesn't seem to conflict with the requirement on readers to imagine two individuals. If one alternatively tried to argue that the author has created two characterisations in this case, one would have to resort to the sort of strategies advocates of the bundle theory of substances use to defend it from similar objections (see, for instance, Rodriguez-Pereyra 2004).

[13]This may be claiming too much given that some characterisations appear to involve uninstantiated and even impossible properties (thanks to redacted for pressing this point). Consider examples like Lewis Carroll's 'frumious bandersnatch'. Even the most extreme Platonists about properties may baulk at a property of frumiousness. I suggest that the properties involved in the bandersnatch-characterisation include the *property of having a terror-inducing property whose name is 'frumiousness*'. The question to ask is what properties should the reader (engaging in the conventional pretence associated with the fiction) imagine to be instantiated. In the 'frumious bandersnatch' case, the reader should imagine that a property of a certain type is instantiated; but there is no real property of that type that she should imagine to be instantiated. Of course, the property of having a terror-inducing property whose name is 'frumiousness' is actually uninstantiated. Other fictions provide other examples of uninstantiated properties. Aristotelians about properties deny there are such things. The only way to bring Aristotelians on board may to reformulate the definition of 'characterisation' with 'concepts' or 'predicates' in place of 'properties'.

The initial characterisation of characterisations can be refined. The fact that characters evolve can be accommodated. In a case of character evolution, there is a structure comprising properties, P, Q and R bound by the relation of having been represented as coinstantiated by author A in work w. Let me henceforth call this a work-specific characterisation.[14] And there is a related structure comprising properties P, Q, S and T bound by the relation of having been represented as coinstantiated by author B in work x: another work-specific characterisation. In most familiar cases – for example, in the case of the evolving Hermione Granger-characterisation of JK Rowling's series of books – A = B; but in some familiar cases A ≠ B.

An evolving characterisation is a structure comprising these related structures and the other structures that are appropriately related to the initial and subsequent structures. I say 'appropriately related': some care is required in the specification of the relation that binds together work-specific characterisations into an evolving characterisation. It might be supposed that, for example, for the work-specific Holmes-characterisations of different Holmes-stories to be parts of the same evolving Holmes-characterisation it would suffice for Conan Doyle to have intended that anyone who read both the earlier and later works should imagine that there is a single individual such that both characterisations are characterisations of that individual. But I suggest that authorial intentions are not always sufficient to ensure the obtaining of the relation in question. Suppose that Hilary Mantel intended that readers of *Wolf Hall* imagine that there is a single individual such that both her Thomas Cromwell-characterisation and Conan Doyle's Mrs Hudson-characterisation are characterisations of that individual. Suppose she never told anyone else about this intention. Are the two work-specific characterisations then part of a single evolving characterisation? I suggest not.

In specifying the relation that binds work-specific characterisations into an evolving characterisation, I will again draw on Walton. My suggestion is that two work-specific characterisations are part of a single evolving characterisation just if the rules of the official game of make-believe that draws on both works as props[15] mandate participants

[14]There is also a period-specific characterisation: a structure comprising properties, P, Q and R bound by the relation of having been represented as coinstantiated by author A at time t. A notion of 'evolving characterisation' could be elaborated in terms of period-specific characterisations, but the notion that is perhaps most frequently invoked by literary critics does it in terms of work-specific characterisations.

[15]This raises the question, when does such an official game exist? It is plausible that there is an official game that draws on all of Conan Doyle's Holmes stories as props. But is there also an official game that draws on both Conan Doyle's stories and the 2009 Guy Ritchie directed movie, *Sherlock Holmes*? I don't think it is too remiss of me not to give a definitive answer to this question, given that it isn't just the details of *my* account that hinge on the answer. Accounts of truth in the (world of the) Holmes stories also await an answer to the question of just what 'Holmes stories' are canonical.

in the game to imagine that the two characterisations characterise a single individual.

An evolving characterisation is probably the better candidate for what is at issue in most judgements that purport to concern 'fictional characters'. But the notions of *work-specific* and *period-specific* characterisation (a characterisation of this sort can be dated to a specific time) are also deployed by critics, as for instance when they want to draw attention to a striking discontinuity in the evolution of a character, for example, 'the monomaniacal Holmes of *A Study in Scarlet* is a different character to the cultured polymath of later works'.[16]

When literary critics venture hypotheses about 'the character of Obadiah Slope' what is at issue, I contend, is a characterisation of one sort or another. This Slope-characterisation fills the role defined by critical discourse concerning 'the character of Slope'. But in Section 2, I distinguished two types of theoretical roles defined by fictional character-talk. What about the role defined by talk concerning such entities as 'the character of the femme fatale' and 'the character of the ethnic sidekick'?[17]

The theoretical entities that such talk concerns can be understood as similar yet different sorts of entities to characterisations as defined above. These were structures constituted by properties bound by a relation of having been represented *by* an individual author (or structures of such structures). The theoretical entity that is at issue in talk of, for example, the 'character of the femme fatale' can be explained as a

[16]What about modal variation? Could a characterisation have involved different properties? Could an evolving characterisation have evolved differently? Could a characterisation have been created by a different author? It is unclear to me to what extent an account of the theoretical entities at issue in 'fictional character-talk' *should* allow for modal variation. But the account I have given can be tailored to allow for as little or as much modal variation as should be allowed (in a context). Think of a concrete artefact composed of parts that have been put together by an artificer at a specific point in time; and think of a concrete physical artefact that evolves over time. The questions of whether such an artefact could have been composed of different parts or evolved in a different way or been created by a different artificer parallel our questions. The answers in each case depend on what should be held fixed and regarded as essential to the characterisation/concrete artefact: a core of characterising properties/parts, the initial stage of an evolving characterisation/concrete artefact, the author/artificer-dependent relation that binds the elements of the structure …? I'll repeat that it is unclear to me what should be regarded as essential. However it seems to me that the analogy with the case of the concrete artefact should lead me to deny that a characterisation could have failed to possess *any* of its actual component characterising properties. Is this a problem for my account? Does 'fictional character talk' allow the acceptability of, for example, 'the character of Slope could have been a (fictional) bowling ball'? Insofar as such talk concerns the theoretical entities that my account tries to capture the answer is no. This is obvious, or it should be. What muddies the waters slightly I suggest is that arguably talk with a different purpose – talk about the intentional objects of imaginative episodes – can sensibly entertain hypotheses like 'Slope (that very imaginary individual) might have been represented as a bowling ball'. In Section 5, I will argue that it shouldn't be assumed that accounts of the entities that fill the 'fictional character' theoretical role, and accounts of the intentional objects of imaginative episodes, are accounts of the same things.

[17]See, for example, Zackel, Frederick (2000).

structure comprising of properties bound by a generic *having been represented* relation. Instances of this generic entity – for example, the Kathie Moffat-characterisation from *Out of the Past* – are instances of structures that include those properties bound by specific *has been represented* relations.

Both sorts of entity – specific characterisations and generic characterisations – exist uncontroversially (comparatively speaking). I will spell out in the next section how neatly they fill the roles I have nominated them for and how much better they fit the roles than other candidates.

## *4. The role and the candidates*

Specific characterisations as defined in Section 3 do justice to creation claims, complexity claims, verisimilitude claims and property claims. A work-specific or an evolving Slope-characterisation is an entity that would not exist were it not for the imaginative activity of a specific author. It can properly be said to have been created by a specific author, and its identity is anchored to the author or to specific works. Obviously, a characterisation of this sort involves properties and its level of complexity is determined by the variety of those properties and their interrelations. If the properties involved in the Slope-characterisation could plausibly be instantiated by a real person then it is true to life.

Generic characterisations also do justice to the sorts of claims that define the theoretical role that they are candidates for. They also involve properties and their level of complexity is determined by the variety of those properties and their interrelations. Typically, a generic characterisations is not dependent on a specific author for its existence. But generic characterisations are not independent of any fiction making activities. This fits with what is communicated by locutions like (6).

(6) The detective who features in classic crime fiction is the creation of Victorian authors, and reflects Victorian sensibilities.

Characterisations are a good fit for the theoretical roles that they are candidates to fill. How do other candidates fare? I will first consider some of the candidates offered by realists. Friend describes the debate between 'internal' and 'external' realism …

According to internal realism, fictitious objects are abstracta such as person-kinds (Wolterstorff), roles (Currie), or character-types (Lamarque; see also Zalta). Like the rhyme scheme of a sonnet, these are eternal, uncreated entities, delineated or constituted by sets of properties; for every set of properties, there is a corresponding object. In the case of fictitious objects, the individuating properties are those the character has from a perspective

'internal' to the fiction, such as being a young woman or being a Danish prince. Authors may be said to create characters, but only in the sense of making them fictional, by creating the narratives in which they appear. According to external realism, fictitious objects are more like novels, literally created by authors and dependent for their continued existence on texts and readers (Kripke; van Inwagen, 'Creatures of Fiction'; Howell, 'Review of *Nonexistent Objects*,"Review of *Mimesis as Make-Believe*'; Salmon, 'Nonexistence'; Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*). On this view, fictitious objects are individuated by such 'external' properties as having been created by Tolstoy, being introduced on the first page of Emma, etc., rather than by properties attributed in the story. (Friend 2007, p. 147).

External and internal realism as defined by Friend both get something substantially right about the occupant of one of the theoretical roles that needs to be filled. It's just that each is right about the occupant of a different role. The generic items alluded to by talk of 'the character of the femme fatale' are indeed individuated by the properties associated with them and are not the creations of *specific* authors. The specific items at issue in talk about 'the character of Emma' are indeed individuated by the conditions of their creation. An item of this sort that evolves over several stories may fail to be defined by the properties associated with it by one story or one author.

Neither external realism nor internal realism, as these positions are delineated by the authors cited by Friend, offers a plausible candidate for *both* theoretical roles. And neither position offers a compelling candidate even for the role its candidate is best equipped to fill. Internal realism as defined by Friend fails to acknowledge that the generic items alluded to in talk of 'the character of the femme fatale', although they don't depend for their existence on the actions of particular authors, nonetheless are not independent of any fiction making activity.[18] The authors that Friend identifies as external realists do justice to creation claims. But they don't obviously do justice to complexity claims, verisimilitude claims or property claims. Thomasson's version of external realism makes no provision for internal structure – involving properties attributed in stories – in her 'abstract artefacts'. Kripke and Howell are also silent on this

[18]Lamarque – one of those identified by Friend as an internal realist – attempts to account for creation claims as follows. He says 'As characters per se, and thus types, they are not created, for sets of properties exist just to the extent that the properties themselves exist, an existence which in the case of universals like being a detective, being a villain, seems to be timeless. However, as fictional characters they are created, to the extent that their grounding narratives are created, and to the extent that they can be individuated in a quasi-indexical manner by pointing to the source narrative' (Lamarque 2010, pp. 200–201). I would contend that the explanation I am offering of how the theoretical entities in question are created is simpler and more plausible than this. These entities are not sets but structures bound by relations whose obtaining depends on creative activity.

matter.[19] Van Inwagen posits a relation of 'ascription' between his 'artefacts of literary criticism' and the properties associated with them. But this 'primitive' (Van Inwagen 1977, p. 306) relation is explained as a three-term relation whose third term is the work of fiction or part thereof in which the property is ascribed to the 'creature of fiction'. For a property to be ascribed to an entity, it seems, is not for the property to be a component of that entity, and thus, a variety of ascribed properties don't make for a complex artefact.

Some realist candidates are better. Alberto Voltolini's 'syncretistic' account does a better job by attempting to combine the strengths of both externalist and internalist approaches. According to Voltolini 'a fictional individual is a compound entity consisting of both a make-believe process-type and the set of properties mobilized in that process, as a result of seeing that process-type as regarding that set' (Voltolini 2006, p. 89). This defines 'fictional individuals' as partly made up of properties: thus possessing the required internal complexity.

There are reasons for preferring my candidate to Voltolini's. Voltolini's candidate is a bipartite entity, possessing, he allows, an 'admittedly unexpected – hybrid nature' (Voltolini 2009, p. 51) – part process and part set. If Universal Composition is not granted, then the only reason to posit such an entity is its alleged ability to fill the theoretical role specified above. If Universal Composition is granted, then the existence of such an entity is not problematic. But in contrast, the existence of my candidate is unproblematic even if Universal Composition is not granted. My candidate, as I have argued, comes for (very nearly) free. If it can fill the theoretical role, then more contentious, more complicated and more unexpected alternatives are otiose.

Another realist candidate that does a good job insofar as it attributes the required complexity to its candidate is Simon Evnine's. Evnine proposes to 'take fictional characters to be hylomorphically complex, abstract artefacts that have properties, or sets of properties, as their matter' (Evnine 2016, p. 140). Evnine's account of the nature of his candidates relies on hylomorphic concepts like 'matter', making comparisons difficult. But the suggestion seems to be that 'fictional characters' involve properties, but also

[19]Catharine Abell's contention that 'the properties they [i.e. 'fictional entities'] actually possess are those they exhibit from an external perspective. It is merely fictional that they possess the properties they exhibit from an internal perspective' (Abell 2020, p. 140) is characteristic of external realism. Abell speaks of Emma 'exhibiting' (Abell 2020, p. 122) internal properties (i.e. properties attributed by fictions) like *being a woman*. But she makes it clear that to exhibit properties in this sense is just to fictionally possess them and not to involve them constitutively in any way. Salmon intriguingly suggests that 'The characters of a fiction—the occupants of roles in the fiction—are in some real sense parts of the fiction itself' (1998, pp. 78–79). Enrico Terrone – whose (2021) account also builds on Francois Recanati's work (including Recanati 2012) – develops this suggestion more explicitly in maintaining that 'a fictional character' is 'an element in a representation' (Terrone 2021, p. 137). Insofar as representations can be structured or complex this may allow that so are the relevant parts.

depend for their existence on creative intentions. Artefacts – including non-physical artefacts – are 'the imposition of mind on matter' (Evnine 2016, p. 145), the contribution of mind in the case of 'fictional characters' being some sort of creative intention.

This seems to preclude 'fictional characters' created by fiction generating computer programs, which I think is a mistake. But rather than advertise additional minor points of disagreement between my view and views like Voltolini's and Evnine's – which I think get a lot right – I will talk about the one big thing that I think they, and all realists, get wrong. Realists take their candidates to be the referents of serious, truth oriented utterances of names like 'Slope' and 'Toad'. They also take their candidates to exist, and so they have difficulty accounting for the apparent truth of singular negative existential statements like 'Slope does not exist'.[20] Anti-realists and noneists/Meinongians have an advantage over realists in that they can take these statements at face value and take them to be true. This advantage accrues to my candidate and its closest antecedents. I deny that my candidate is the referent of serious, truth oriented uses of 'Slope' and 'Toad'. I agree with both anti-realists and Meinongians that even these uses of 'Slope' and 'Toad' fail to refer to existing entities. And so I can agree that 'Mr Toad doesn't exist' is straightforwardly true.

The closest antecedents to my view are anti-realist views like one of the views outlined in Everett and Schroeder (2015). Everett and Schroeder introduce the notion of an 'idea' which they argue can usefully be invoked both by realists and 'irrealists' about fictional characters. Realists can claim that serious uses of 'Slope' refer to ideas. The resulting realist view shares the advantages of Voltolini and Evnine's accounts. But irrealists, Everett and Schroeder maintain, can make use of ideas in another way:

> perhaps certain character property ascriptions should be seen as cases where we are talking about storytelling ideas, rather than fictional characters. Thus, the irrealist might take the critic's dry assertion of 'Holmes was created by Conan Doyle' to be made outside the scope of any

[20]Realists adopt a variety of strategies for explaining the import of true negative existential statements involving names like 'Slope' and 'Emma Woodhouse'. Locutions like 'Slope doesn't exist' can't be classed as merely 'conniving'. One strategy (pursued, for an instance, by Thomasson 1999, p. 112) takes the names in these statements to refer to abstract entities and the statements to convey the denial that the entities belong to the kinds they are represented as belonging to. For example, 'Slope doesn't exist' conveys that Slope isn't a *person*. See Everett (2013, pp. 148–163) for a critical discussion. Another broad strategy distinguishes uses of these names that refer to abstracta from uses that don't refer at all and maintains that though a typical utterance of 'Slope doesn't exist' is not merely conniving, the use of 'Slope' in this utterance nonetheless belongs to the latter category. Kripke's implementation of this strategy (Kripke 2013) has it that 'Slope doesn't exist' conveys 'there is no true proposition that Slope exists'. But Nathan Salmon (1998, p. 297) points out that by Kripke's Russellian lights if the propositional term 'that Slope exists' contains a non-referring use of 'Slope' then the former is no more meaningful than the latter. Walters' (unpublished manuscript) implementation of the second strategy allows for 'Slope' to be meaningful even when it fails to refer by invoking a free logic.

pretence or presupposition. Indeed she might accept that it is genuinely true. But she might regard it as making a claim, not about an (imaginary) detective, but rather about the corresponding fictional-person idea. (Everett and Schroeder 2015, p. 290)

The suggested antirealist account takes talk of the sort we are concerned with to be about ideas *rather than* fictional characters (understood as the putative referents of serious uses of names like 'Holmes'). My proposal likewise is that 'fictional character-talk' – the collection of claims that define the theoretical role that realists posit fictional characters to fill – is about characterisations *rather than* fictional characters. The Emma characterisation is not identical to Emma, no more than the Napoleon-characterisation created by Tolstoy is identical to Napoleon. It would be a category mistake in either case to make the identification. I don't make the identification.

Everett and Schroeder's 'irrealist' deployment of ideas resembles Stacie Friend's (2011) deployment of 'notion-networks'. Friend is an anti-realist – she denies there are such things as fictional character – who nonetheless sees the need to posit something beyond the more familiar anti-realism compatible posits to explain fictional character-talk. What exactly are ideas and notion-networks? Everett and Schroeder don't want to allow that the items that fictional character-talk is about are uncreated eternal abstracta, and so they instead allow that ideas are extended in space, occupying room in multiple human crania, and can increase and decrease in size over time. The proposal that these items can literally grow in size doesn't sit very well with fictional character-talk. But of course fictional character-talk is to be taken seriously but not literally; in light of this, readers may not be persuaded that Everett and Schroeder are wrong. Rather than criticise Everett and Schroeder and Friend's proposals for alleged faults, I will point out an implication of their accounts which I am not committed to. Their accounts imply that when people stop thinking Emma-thoughts then the object of those thoughts – the Emma idea/notion network – will cease to exist. In contrast, if an Emma-characterisation involves properties bound by the relation of having been represented as co-instantiated then it can survive the cessation of Emma-thoughts and the destruction of all Emma-representations.

I prefer my proposal, but my primary purpose in mentioning these antecedents to my views is not to criticise them but to credit them with the insight that I urge is key to making sense of fictional character-talk: this talk is about something (other than novels, plots etc.) but it is not about fictional characters.

I have called this claim an 'insight'. But perhaps some readers will find it difficult to see things in this light; because when we engage in serious fictional character-talk, we do of course talk as if 'Slope' 'Emma' and 'Jar Jar' are the names of the very entities we are talking about. Of course, we

talk in this way. But this is the point at which I invoke the imperative to take this talk seriously but not literally.

This imperative has to be invoked to explain locutions like (2) and (3). If locutions like these are taken literally then there is such a fictional character as Emma and this fictional character is a person. That can't be right. Using names like 'Emma' to venture hypotheses about the theoretical entity under discussion, I suggest, is of a piece with venturing these hypotheses by making as if to talk about a person. Making as if to talk about a person called 'Emma' is a playful, oblique way of venturing hypotheses about the Emma-characterisation.[21]

The customary mode of talking is entrenched and has not been subjected by literary critics themselves to serious semantic scrutiny. This is not an indictment of critics. Employing the customary mode of fictional character-talk – talking as if Austen created a person called 'Emma' – is confusing only for philosophers. The hypotheses made by critics via this mode of talking, when they are cogent, are easily understood by other critics. As I claimed above, these hypotheses can be and sometimes are couched as literal statements of fact about characterisations. (7) and (8) are examples.

(7) The characterisations created by 19th century authors like George Eliot are as complex and show as much psychological insight as anything in 20th century fiction.
(8) George Lucas's clumsy combinations of superficial traits don't compare in complexity or verisimilitude or interest to Gene Rodenberry's characterisations.

## 5. *Other arguments for fictional characters*

I maintain that characterisations are more credible candidates for the theoretical roles defined by truth oriented 'fictional character' talk than the likes

[21]Does this explanation cover all cases that motivate the claim that 'Emma' refers to a fictional character? A supplementary – or an alternative – suggestion, is that sometimes Emma-talk is confused. Consider statements like

'Emma is not real, she's just a fictional character.'
and compare them to statements like

'Pegasus is not real, he's just an idea'.

The latter is a common response among non-philosophers confronted with the puzzle of (apparently) empty names. Quine (1948) is right to pour scorn on this statement understood literally as identifying Pegasus with an idea. However there is a respectable claim that perhaps captures what confused utterers of 'Pegasus is just an idea' would want to say, were they to succeed in clarifying their thoughts: the claim that there is a Pegasus-idea – an idea with a certain kind of content – but this idea fails to refer to anything. I suggest utterances of 'Emma is not real, she's just a fictional character' and 'Emma is the creation of Jane Austen' and 'Emma is a mere artefact of literary criticism,' although false if taken literally, may in a similar way be confused attempts to articulate more respectable claims – truths indeed – about an Emma-characterisation.

of Emma and Mr Toad for two reasons. The first reason is that they are a better fit for the roles. The second reason is that they exist uncontroversially (comparatively speaking) – we get them for free more or less – and the same is not true of Emma and Slope.

But it has been argued that the same is true of Emma and Slope. Thomasson argues along these lines when she contends that 'to accept that Austen wrote certain sentences in a novel pretending to refer to one Emma Woodhouse (not referring back to any actual person), but deny that she created a fictional character, is a mere distortion of ordinary usage' (Thomasson 2003, p. 149).

The suggestion is that a grasp of 'ordinary usage' is sufficient to reveal the truth of (E).

(E): If Austen wrote certain sentences in a novel pretending to refer to one Emma Woodhouse (not referring back to any actual person), then she created a fictional character

In other words (E) is an analytic truth. But is it? What about (EC)?

(EC): If Austen wrote certain sentences in a novel pretending to refer to one Emma Woodhouse (not referring back to any actual person), she created a characterisation as of one Emma Woodhouse.

Given the definition of 'characterisation', (EC) is a superior candidate for analytic truth than (E). But now consider (EX), which is clearly not an analytic truth.

(EX): if Austen wrote certain sentences in a novel pretending to refer to one Emma Woodhouse (not referring back to any actual person), she created a characterisation as of one Emma Woodhouse, and she also created an additional entity: a fictional character.

It is not a distortion of ordinary usage to accept that Austen wrote the sentences in question but deny that she created two items: the Emma-characterisation and the fictional character, Emma. It is compatible with ordinary usage to assert that at most she created one of these items. But ordinary usage doesn't tell us that if Austen created one of these items it is the fictional character, Emma, that she created and not the Emma-characterisation. Indeed the superior plausibility of (EC) over (E) as a candidate for analytic truth suggests the contrary.

I conclude that (E) is not an analytic truth if it says something distinct from (EC). Whatever plausibility (E) possesses as a candidate for analytic

truth, I suggest, derives from the plausibility of (EC). If 'fictional character' is left undefined (E) can be understood as conveying (EC). It can be understood as a claim about a characterisation, made in the way that such claims are typically made.

Positing characterisations obviates the need to allow the existence of fictional individuals. We don't need to posit fictional individuals to explain the truth of theoretical claims 'about fictional characters': characterisations do a better job. And if characterisations are acknowledged, the argument that fictional individuals come for free can be seen to be unsound.

There is another sort of argument for fictional individuals, which it would be remiss not to mention. Acknowledging characterisations doesn't blunt the force of this argument for fictional individuals. However this argument is best seen not as an argument for the existence of fictional individuals, but rather as an argument for non-existent objects of thought.

Let me explain. This is how Friend outlines the argument. …

> One motivation for realism […] is the intentionality, or object-directedness, of thoughts and discourse about fictional characters (Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*). Thoughts about Raskolnikov are about Raskolnikov, not Fyodor Karamazov or Hamlet. They often function as singular thoughts: in imagining that Hamlet hesitates, I am not thinking about someone or other who hesitates, but about Shakespeare's character. (Friend 2007, p. 147)

In imagining that Hamlet hesitates, realists have it, I am imagining, of an object, that it hesitates. And so there is a need to posit Hamlet as the 'intentional object' of my imagining.

Consider the thought that would typically be expressed by the words 'the character of Hamlet is a more complex creation than the character of Jar Jar Binks'. I would contend that if this thought has an intentional object it is Shakespeare's Hamlet-characterisation. That is the complex abstract artefact that I have in mind when I think the thought. But the imaginative thought expressed by 'Hamlet hesitates' does not obviously have as its intentional object a complex abstract artefact. That is, it is not obvious that my imagining involves a deliberate or unwitting category mistake (cf. Friend 2007, p. 151). I would not propose the Hamlet-characterisation as a candidate for the intentional object of this thought, nor would I propose a characterisation as the intentional object of my admiration of Optimus Prime. But insofar as the fictional individuals posited by Thomasson and Van Inwagen are also supposedly abstract existents that are intended to fill the theoretical role that I have argued is best filled by characterisations, they also seem ill fitted to serve as the required intentional objects.

Two of the realist arguments, I conclude, are not arguments for the same sort of thing. The argument that mental states like my admiration for

Optimus Prime and my imagining that Hamlet hesitates require intentional objects is best understood as an argument for a quasi-Meinongian or noneist[22] account of these mental states. That is, for an account that allows that 'Hamlet' and 'Emma' and 'Jar Jar' sometimes refer to non-existent individuals. Such accounts are not realist in the sense I have been employing the word. They do not take fictional individuals to exist. For many purposes these accounts can be classified together with the realist accounts discussed above. Certainly most self-described anti-realists would find them at least as problematic as the realist accounts I have criticised, even though they grant the anti-realist contention that fictional individuals don't exist. Understandably, these anti-realists find the caveat that fictional individuals are examples of *non-existents* to be confusing double-talk. These anti-realists must dispute the soundness of the argument, and many have done so. Sainsbury for instance argues that we can have 'intentionality without exotica' (Sainsbury 2010b).

As a matter of fact I disagree. I think there may be good reasons to posit non-existent intentional objects. But in this paper, I have maintained that by accepting that fictional character-talk is not about fictional characters but about something like characterisations, we can explain the import of a lot of puzzling discourse without the need to posit existing fictional individuals. I have explained that characterisations, as I have defined them, come for (very nearly) free, and I have argued that fictional characters don't *additionally* come for free. I have argued that characterisations fit the theoretical role that realists posit fictional characters to fill and are better candidates than fictional characters. Characterisations give realists what they want without giving anti-realists anything they don't want.[23]

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[22]For example, Priest (2005) and Connolly (2011). Moltmann (2015) distinguishes 'intentional objects' from 'fictional objects', claiming the former don't exist while the latter exist.

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