

# ‘Truth in Fiction’ Reprised

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*The paper surveys recent appraisals of David Lewis’s seminal paper on truth in fiction. It examines variations on standard criticisms of Lewis’s account, aiming to show that, if developed as Lewis suggests in his 1983 Postscript A, his proposals on the topic are—as Hanley puts it—‘as good as it gets’. Thus elaborated, Lewis’s account can resist the objections, and it offers a better picture of fictional discourse than recent resurrections of other classic works of the 1970s by Kripke, van Inwagen and Searle. The turn that Lewis suggests and the paper recommends draws on the remaining outstanding contribution from that time: Walton’s.*

## 1. Lewis’s Goals in ‘Truth in Fiction’

This paper aims to survey recent appraisals of David Lewis’s (1978) work on truth in fiction—one of a handful of works in the 1970s that shaped the current debate. It is not about truth *through* fiction—although Lewis also addresses this in his 1983 *Postscript C*—but *fictional truth* or truth *in* fiction, as Davies (2016) aptly phrases the distinction. Like Hanley’s (2004), this will be an opinionated review; Woodward (2011), Davies (2016) and Kroon and Voltolini (2019) have more neutral presentations. I will argue that, if developed as Lewis (1978, p. 276) suggests in his 1983 *Postscript A*, his views are—echoing Hanley—as good as it gets. The crux of the matter is to ground accounts like his on an adequate meta-semantics—an apt grounding for fictional content. Thus developed, Lewis’s account can resist objections like mine (García-Carpintero, 2007), and others by Abell (2020, §4.5), Bowker (2021), Friend (2017a) or Stock (2017, §2.5). More than that, it offers a better picture of fictional discourse than von Solodkoff and Woodward’s (2017) and Predelli’s (2020) recent elaborations of other classic works of the 1970s, by Kripke (2013), van Inwagen (1977, 1983) and Searle (1975). The turn that Lewis suggests, and I will recommend, draws on the remaining outstanding contribution from the 1970s, which later developed into Walton’s (1990) magnum opus.

To state Lewis’s goals, we must draw a threefold distinction in what I just called ‘fictional discourse’, implicit in Lewis’s, van Inwagen’s, Kripke’s and Walton’s work, which other authors articulated later (cf., e.g. Thomasson, 2003, p. 207). I usually rely at this juncture on Bonomi’s (2008) apt terminology. Declarative sentences convey by default assertions, which we evaluate as correct or otherwise depending on whether they are true.<sup>1</sup> Let us thus consider three uses of declaratives in connection with fiction:

- (1) Emma Woodhouse had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world.
- (2) (According to/In *Emma*) Emma Woodhouse had lived nearly twenty-one years.
- (3) Emma Woodhouse is a fictional character.

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1 Cf. García-Carpintero (2021a) for elaboration and defence.

Consider first Austen's utterance of (1), as part of her longer utterance that, with some idealization, we can think as the act of putting forward *Emma* for readers to enjoy. Following Bonomi, I will call uses like this *textual*. Even when, taken literally as assertions, they conflict with what we believe, we do not typically find any tension in accepting them and we would not find it plausible to criticize Austen on this count.<sup>2</sup> The other two types differ in that they lack this feature. There is, firstly, the *paratextual* use of sentences such as (2)—with or without a prefix—to report on what goes on in a fiction; that is, the character of the *fictional world* it presents, its *plot* or *story*. Readers of *Emma* would count (2) in such a use as straightforwardly true, while they would reject as wrong the results of substituting 'fifty-one' for 'twenty-one' in it. Finally, I will call *metatextual* uses of sentences such as (3); they are also intuitively truth-evaluable relative to the actual world but not content-reporting, in that they are not (obviously) equivalent to explicit content ascriptions like the prefixed version of (2).<sup>3</sup>

Lewis's primary goal is to account for paratextual uses by providing the truth-conditions of utterances like (2). He acknowledges metatextual uses like (3), but he puts them aside (p. 263).<sup>4</sup> The questions he initially sets up concern the behaviour of *prima facie* empty names like 'Emma Woodhouse' in (2): how could the unprefixed version be true or even merely truth-evaluable,<sup>5</sup> if we reject the 'Meinongian' view that they (against first appearances) do refer after all? Lewis uses 'Meinongian' in a capacious sense, encompassing any theorist who takes fictional names to refer to some more or less exotic entity. It thus applies to Kripke (2013) and van Inwagen (1977). Their arguments rely primarily on metatextual uses, even though at least the latter extends the account to paratextual uses.<sup>6</sup> Lewis (p. 263) grants that it would be an explanatory benefit for them to handle uses like (3) 'with no special dodges', perhaps outdoing the problems that, according to him, make the Meinongian way 'hard' (pp. 261–262). I will evaluate costs and benefits in a companion piece (García-Carpintero 2022a), concluding in favour of Lewis. Here I will focus on his account of truth in fiction. I will present it in §2, drawing attention to its explanatory ambitions. I will discuss objections in §3, developing the already stressed point that Lewisians need to embrace a specific sort of account of fictions and textual discourse to adequately deal with them. The paper's main emphasis lies in its angle on explanatory aims for accounts of truth in fiction—paratextual discourse—and the meta-semantic commitments required to adequately achieve them.

2 I have cases of 'imaginative resistance' in mind when I hedge with 'typically'; Stock (2017, Ch. 4) has a compelling discussion.

3 Here the hedge 'obviously' is due to the possible appeal to 'extended fictions', envisaged by Walton (1990, Ch. 10) and other fictionalists such as Brock (2002) and Everett (2013).

4 Bare page references henceforth to Lewis (1978).

5 Cf. Sawyer (2012, p. 153).

6 Cf. Brock and Everett's (2015) 'Introduction' for a good presentation. Van Inwagen (1977, pp. 299–300) rejects *Meinongianism*, because he uses the term in a more restricted sense, applying only to views on which fictional names refer to the specific sort of exotic entity that Meinong is supposed to have envisaged. Here I use 'Meinongian' in Lewis's wider sense.

## 2. Lewis's Account: Narrative Pretence

In this section, I will present Lewis's account of truth in fiction—namely, paratextual discourse. After making explicit his theoretical assumptions (§2.1), I will follow his argumentative course (§§2.2–2.4), making some interpretive claims on its progress as we proceed.

### 2.1 Lewis's Assumptions

To carry out his task, Lewis assumes (i) that paratextual uses include, implicitly if not explicitly, the prefix 'according to/in fiction F';<sup>7</sup> (ii) that this is an intensional sentential operator that takes as input the content of the embedded sentence; (iii) that contents are to be modelled in possible-worlds semantics ('PWS' henceforth). Lewis thinks that he can thus handle 'Emma Woodhouse' in (2) without Meinongian commitments, along the lines of PWS accounts of 'Vulcan' in 'Leverrier believed that Vulcan causes perturbations in Mercury's orbit'.<sup>8</sup>

It is unclear how committed Lewis is to the prefix being present in paratextual uses at some *logical form* level. He describes unprefixes sentences as ambiguous abbreviations (pp. 262–263), but this is compatible with Kripke's (2013) nonchalant take on the operator: 'one can regard this as a form of ellipsis, or not, as one pleases' (Kripke 2013, p. 58). The syntactic reality of such an operator has been questioned (Bertolet, 1984). The objection might be dodged by adopting Predelli's (1997) contextualism; Predelli assumes Meinongianism in that early work, but the view can be framed in a semantics for fictional names closer to Lewis's (García-Carpintero 2022a). On this view, paratextual uses of unprefixes sentences are true or false in their contexts not relative to how things are at the actual world, but at 'the' fictional world portrayed by the relevant story.<sup>9</sup>

The contextualist view is consistent with Walton's (1990) account of paratextual uses (Everett, 2013, p. 48). Walton appeals to a distinction between *game world* and *work world* (Walton 1990, 58ff). The former is 'the' fictional world of authorized engagements with the 'props' constituting the work (see below, §3), which fulfils its prescriptions to imagine; the latter, the less subjective one for the work itself. Readers represent themselves *de se* as characters in 'the' fictional game world, as fictional addressees of the fictional teller that Lewis's *Report Model* assumes, see §2.3 below. Unprefixes utterances like (2) are conniving 'assertions' made in those games, by adopting the 'internal perspective ... of *imaginative involvement*' (Lamarque, 1996, p. 14). For Walton they ground the outright

7 Lewis only uses the operators 'in fiction F'; it is not clearly interchangeable with the also common 'according to fiction F', cf. Sainsbury (2014), Semeijn (2020), Walters (2015). We may need a precisified notion for theoretical purposes, but I will ignore the issue here.

8 The thought would be rejected by 'object-involving' theorists of names like Evans (1982); Kripke's (2013), van Inwagen's (1977) and Predelli's (2017, 2020) views raise similar doubts. Lewis (p. 267) grants them that the names fiction-makers use are not real names—too graciously, in my view, cf. García-Carpintero (2022a, 2022b).

9 The scare quotes signal that, on PWS, there are a plurality of such worlds. Recanati (2000, pp. 213–226), Reimer (2005) and Voltolini (2006) develop similar contextualist accounts.

truth of the prefixed utterance, made from ‘the external perspective ... of an *awareness of artifice*’ (Lamarque, 1996, p. 14).<sup>10</sup>

Lewis’s reliance on PWS is a notorious source of worries in the face of impossibility and indeterminacy in fictions, §3. But we must record a very significant virtue of PWS. Lewis takes it that paratextual uses report on contents that fictions have. This can hardly be denied; disagreement lies in how fictions get them. Fictional works have a separable ‘text’ (Currie, 1991), as illustrated by Borges’s ‘Pierre Menard’: two different works can share the text. This ‘text’ is the meaning-vehicle, constituted by words in literature, sounds, performances or images in other media.<sup>11</sup> Contents are abstract; if, as PWS assumes, they are structureless properties selecting states of affairs, they may be shared by utterances in different media—in different languages but also in depictive, or dramatic media. This captures the narratological distinction between the *narration* or *sjužet* and the *narrative*, *plot*, *story*, or *fabula* that it conveys; and it allows that a film may be a faithful adaptation of a novel or a play.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 Lewis’s Preliminary Account and its Problems

As a first shot, Lewis considers an account using the notions just mentioned: ‘a prefixed sentence “In fiction  $f$ ,  $\phi$ ” is true (or, as we shall also say,  $\phi$  is true in the fiction  $f$ ) iff  $\phi$  is true at [...] those worlds where the plot of the fiction [ $f$ ] is enacted, where a course of events takes place that matches the story’ (p. 264). He dismisses the proposal for two reasons. The first is ‘a threat of circularity’: perhaps the extraction of plot from text can only be accomplished ‘by figuring out what is true in the stories – that is, only by exercising ... tacit mastery of the very concept of truth in fiction that we are now investigating’ (p. 265). By itself, this is not a compelling objection; circularity issues afflict most philosophical accounts. The real worry is how narrow, hence unilluminating, the circle is when there is one. I suggest interpreting Lewis as complaining that the plot proposal is not explanatory enough, which is true. As we are about to see, Lewis’s second objection shows that it is not, as does the issue to which he devotes most of the paper—the generation of content implicit in fictions.

The second objection is inspired by Kripke’s (2013, pp. 40–41) discussion of descriptivism about names like ‘Sherlock Holmes’. Let’s consider the *common currency* homonym

10 Cf. Eagle (2007) for a similar picture. Bowker (2021) objects to Lewis that prefixed utterances impose an external perspective, precluding an ‘experience of actuality’—one, I take it, of ‘immersion in’ or ‘transportation to’ (Chasid, 2021) the fictional world. Bowker offers interesting examples, suggesting that only unprefixed utterances afford that experience; Langland-Hassan (2020, p. 228–229) would dispute this, but see Chasid’s (2021, §2.1) compelling response. Bowker 2021, §3.3) thinks that a Waltonian contextualist account is thus better attuned to this phenomenal difference, which he describes as ‘aesthetic’. As said, I am not sure that Lewis needs the prefix to be syntactically present at *logical form*; and I am unclear anyway why this level should be ‘psychological real’, preventing immersion.

11 Elicker (2020) and Kim (2021) show that formal aspects of the text might also contribute to fictional content.

12 Cf. Smuts (2009) and Cray (2019) for further references. Smuts raises issues for the account of the distinction I am assuming, which Cray confronts.

proper name (i.e., a specific referring tool linked to a particular ‘baptism’, in contrast to the *generic name* shared by namesakes, cf. Kaplan (1990)) that Conan Doyle uses in composing the stories. That homonym, it is natural to say, fails to refer at the actual world; it may merely be a pretend name (Kripke, 2013; Predelli, 2020). Now, no matter how incredible (p. 265) it may be, the actual world may be one of the possible worlds at which, intuitively, ‘the plot is enacted’. But then, the proposition that *that ‘Holmes’-homonym refers* would not be true at all worlds *at which the plot is enacted*. Without further elaboration, the plot account would then have it that that proposition is not true in the Holmes stories. But it clearly should be: according to that fiction, that specific ‘Holmes’-homonym is used by Watson to refer.

As said, this objection is better seen as supporting the first. It suggests that the notions of *plot* or *story* should be elaborated so that they may encompass meta-linguistic propositions like *that ‘Holmes’ refers*—thus excluding the actual world even under the outrageously improbable Kripkean hypothesis. The same is shown by the generation of implicit content: intuitively, it is true in the Holmes stories that Holmes has two nostrils, or that it takes longer for Holmes and Watson to walk from 221b Baker Street to Waterloo than to Paddington: how should we understand the intuitive notions of a *plot* or a *story*, to secure this result?

### 2.3 Textual Discourse: The Mere Pretence View and the Report Model

It is to address these worries that Lewis (pp. 265–266) finally comes to consider textual uses. One would have said that a meta-semantics for paratextual uses should be based outright on an account of the ontology of fictions, hence of textual uses; after all, paratextual uses are reports on fictional contents. We do not need only a semantics for them, but also a meta-semantics—an account of how the semantics is fixed (García-Carpintero 2021a). Lewis may have thought that one might do with semantic intuitions;<sup>13</sup> the Kripkean worry shows that this is wrong.

At this crucial juncture, Lewis nonchalantly assumes a view of textual uses common among philosophers at the time of his writing—the one influentially articulated by Searle (1975) that they are *mere pretense* (‘MP’ henceforth):<sup>14</sup>

Storytelling is pretence. The storyteller purports to be telling the truth about matters whereof he has knowledge. He purports to be talking about characters who are known to him, and whom he refers to, typically, by means of their ordinary proper names. But if his story is fiction, he is not really doing these things ... he plays a false

13 Some philosophers pursue these debates by just relying on them, cf. e.g. Franzén (2021), Phillips (1999), Proudfoot (2006), Stokke (2021). Others, however—like in the end Lewis—acknowledge the need to rely on accounts of textual uses, cf. Byrne (1993, p. 32), Hanley (2004, 114), Lamarque (1990, 337 ff.), Livingston (1993, p. 106).

14 Previous proponents include Armstrong (1971), Beardsley (1970, pp. 58–61), Gale (1971), Macdonald (1954), Ohmann (1971) and Urmson (1976). Both Kripke (2013, p. 24) and van Inwagen (1977, p. 306) also espouse MP, as casually as Lewis does.

part, goes through a form of telling known fact when he is not doing so. This is most apparent when the fiction is told in the first person. Conan Doyle pretended to be a doctor named Watson, engaged in publishing truthful memoirs of events he himself had witnessed. But the case of third-person narrative is not essentially different (p. 266)

Searle (1975) rejects the alternative view—which Currie (1990) elaborated later along Gricean lines—that, in proffering declarative sentences, authors of fiction are ‘not performing the illocutionary act of making an assertion but the illocutionary act of telling a story or writing a novel’ (Searle 1975, p. 323); I will use ‘fictionalizing’ for this representational act. I call Searle’s view *mere pretense* (MP) because the proponent of the alternative view (which I will call the *dedicated representation* view, ‘DR’) agrees that fictionalizers may resort to pretence to perform the fictionalizing act: they may have actors pretending or play themselves a role—as Lewis suggests that Conan Doyle does, playing the role of Doctor Watson; cf. Alward (2009, p. 321). But they need not, which is what primarily distinguishes DR from MP: they might convey the contents of their dedicated fictionalizing act directly, without any pretence. On DR, fiction need not be ‘parasitic on “serious” discourse’, Walton (1990, p. 85).

How does MP help with the Kripkean problem in §2.2? Here is Lewis again:

a fiction is a story told by a storyteller on a particular occasion ... there is an act of storytelling; different acts of storytelling, different fictions ... Suppose a fiction employs such names as ‘Sherlock Holmes’. At those worlds where the same story is told as known fact rather than fiction, those names really are what they here purport to be: ordinary proper names of existing characters known to the storyteller. ... The worlds we should consider ... are the worlds where the fiction is told, but as known fact rather than fiction. The act of storytelling occurs, just as it does here at our world; but there it is what here it falsely purports to be: truth-telling about matters whereof the teller has knowledge. Our own world cannot be such a world; for if it is really a fiction that we are dealing with, then the act of storytelling at our world was not what it purported to be. (pp. 266–267)

Lewis’s suggestion is thus to theoretically develop the intuitive notions of *plot* or *story* by assuming an ontological view of fiction and textual uses, MP, which allows him to claim that they always have meta-linguistic components. Indeed, if we agree (Walton, 1990, §4.1) that fictional truths include *implicit*, *secondary* or *indirect* ones—those inferred, generated or otherwise grounded on *explicit*, *primary* or *direct* ones (on which more in §3.2)—MP implies that the basic story-constituting fictional truths are *meta-linguistic*. To wit: that a teller (implicit here, as Lewis envisages in the previous quotation) is assertorically uttering (1) ‘as known fact’—namely, representing herself as knowing the relevant content and hence as referring successfully with the specific ‘Emma Woodhouse’ homonym used in the storytelling.<sup>15</sup>

15 Eckardt (2015, 181) notes that this is a “broadened notion of ‘story content’”. In using the feminine gender, I am here going along with Wilson’s (2011, pp. 114–115) view that the fictional teller that Austen ‘plays’ may well be

Matravers (1997) calls this *the Report Model*: ‘in reading a novel, a reader makes-believe he is being given a report of actual events. In other words, he makes-believe the content of the novel is being reported to him as known fact by a narrator’ (1997, p. 79). The real-world Holmes that Kripke imagines must have a real-life Watson for the plot to be enacted; but the thereby-imagined referring ‘Holmes’-homonym that the real-life Watson uses differs there from the one used by Conan Doyle, who—as Lewis explicitly assumes (pp. 266–267)—was writing fiction. When *plot* is understood in this MP-informed way, in the thought experiment the actual world is thus not one at which the plot is enacted, and hence the truth in fiction of ‘*Holmes refers*’ is retained.<sup>16</sup>

#### 2.4 Lewis’s Plurality of Accounts

On this meta-semantic basis, Lewis presents three accounts of truth in fiction, avoiding commitment to any: each is good, he thinks, to capture the usage of some users of paratextual discourse. The first is ANALYSIS 0: ‘a sentence of the form “In fiction *f*,  $\phi$ ” is true iff  $\phi$  is true at every world where *f* is told as known fact’ (cf. Kaplan, 1973, p. 507). This is good to ‘capture the usage of those’ (even if not too many) ‘who never tire of telling us not to read anything into a fiction that is not there explicitly’ (p. 268).<sup>17</sup> This would intuitively yield too few fictional truths, too sparse fictional worlds. Note that the proposal that Lewis builds on MP *prima facie* involves some unmotivated measure of generation—some content inferred from the primary. In (1), Lewis assumes the user of a declarative to ‘represents herself’ as knowing its content. But ANALYSIS 0 goes beyond this. As cases of unreliable narrators or those who speak non-literally show, we are already making a defeasible inference in moving from ‘the teller represents herself as knowing *p*’ to ‘*p* is told as known fact’ (but see below, fn. 24).

This still provides too little content for ordinary assumptions, and hence Lewis offers two more analyses, which he thinks are good for capturing other usages. Each deploys one of the

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(a fictionalized avatar of) herself.

- 16 Lewis (p. 267) assumes that Conan Doyle’s act of pretend reference with his ‘Holmes’-homonym is the same as (or rather *has as a counterpart*, in his modal-realist ontology) Watson’s act of reference with the same homonym (or rather its counterpart). This is challenged by some metaphysics of objects and events, cf. Badura and Berto (2019, p. 180). Indeed, if it is an essential property of the homonym used by Conan Doyle that it lacks a referent, the content that, on the Report Model we are meant to imagine, appears to be thereby impossible.
- 17 D’Alessandro (2016) defends *explicitism*, the view that ‘all the truths in a given fiction are either expressed by explicit statements in the relevant works, or else are implied by such propositions’ (2016, p. 54). This shrewdly allows that some explicitly stated propositions are not true in a fiction, because the narrator is unreliable, or because the statement is not meant literally. D’Alessandro’s argument relies on the possibility of serial fictions like the Holmes stories in which a truth *at a given point in audiences’ exposure* to them (*that Holmes died at Reichenbach Falls, The Final Problem*, 1893) is later overridden (*The Adventure of the Empty House*, 1903). The argument is flawed: the mere possibility of a disavowal does not suffice to make a proposition untrue in a fiction (Motoarcă, 2017), and its actuality can be aptly handled (Walters, 2015, 2017). Which is just as well, because, as D’Alessandro acknowledges (2016, §7), if the argument is valid, there are not *any* truths in fiction: any apparent explicit truth may be later shown to have been untrustworthy, or ironical. Tellingly, D’Alessandro admits (2016, §4) that he lacks any explanation for why literal ironical or unreliable contents are not true in fiction. I will outline one in §3, incompatible with explicitism, fn. 25.

two ‘principles of generation’ that Walton (1990, §4.3) labels *Reality Principle* and *Mutual Belief Principle*—cf. also Wolterstorff’s (1980, pp. 120–124) corresponding  $\alpha$ -principle and  $\beta$ -principle. Roughly, the first allows us to add to the plot truths at the actual world compatible with what is told as known fact; the second, compatible beliefs shared at the time of the fiction’s creation. I refer the reader to Woodward (2011) and Davies (2016) for more details, and I move on now to examine objections to Lewis’s account.

### 3. *Ad Hocery* Objections, and How to Deal with Them

Hanley (2004, p. 113) aptly classifies objections to Lewis’s account in three groups. There are, first, *narrator* issues about the Report Model. Second, *generation* issues about how implicit truths are established. Finally, *modal* worries on Lewis’s reliance on PWS. Possible worlds, as Lewis understands them, are complete and consistent; they provide just one answer to any meaningful yes–no question that can be posed about which conditions they represent as factual. But *prima facie* fictions are impossible and indeterminate, cf. Proudfoot (2006). Lewis anticipates most objections and offers replies; Hanley (2004) develops them. Drawing on Currie (1990) and Lamarque (1990), I will argue that their replies are *ad hoc*—lacking in explanatory power—if MP is assumed for meta-semantic purposes, as Lewis did initially. But both Lewis and Hanley suggest the right move, which is to embrace DR. I will present recent versions of each sort of objection, and I will outline how DR helps to cope with them, without going into any detail about the version of DR that I think offers the best account.

Let’s first review Currie’s (1990) objection. To deal with inadvertent inconsistency as in the Holmes stories on account of conflicting locations of Watson’s war wound, Lewis proposes to state first what is true in consistent ‘revised versions that stay closest to the original’ (p. 275). The *method of union* he prefers (Postscript B) assigns to the fiction two different equally good interpretations—one in which the wound is in the shoulder, another in which it is in the leg; in neither is it in both. This sounds intuitively right, but Currie (1990, 69) objects that it is *ad hoc*: Lewis cannot provide a good reason to prefer it—for example, to the *method of intersection* that he favours in the original paper, on which only what is true in all versions is true in the fiction: Watson has a war wound; it is indeterminate where.

The *ad hocery* complaint I think we should make is that MP cannot justify the choice between the two methods. Lewis mentions as a reason for favouring the method of union that it prevents that ‘some of what’s explicit in the fiction gets lost’ (p. 277). But MP fails to explain why this is to be prevented. Why is Conan Doyle pretending to be Watson saying what he knows? He may be doing it ‘to illustrate an idiotic line of reasoning’ (Currie, 1990, p. 17); that gives no reason to prevent the loss. We are here after correct interpretations of a fiction;<sup>18</sup> not ‘ludic’, *could mean* interpretations, but what it

18 Stokke (2021) argues for a duality of contents: *truth in fiction*, and what he calls *fictional record*. The latter ‘comprises the audience’s picture of what is true according to the narrator’. I do not think the distinction is needed. Stokke relies on reversal cases like Holmes’s death (fn. 17). They can be handled as Walters (2015, 2017) proposes, making the distinction otiose.



does mean.<sup>19</sup> The *ad hocery* objection is that the MP-based meta-semantics cannot help here while, in contrast, any version of DR offers the needed grounds. Take Currie's Gricean view. If we adopt Stock's (2017) *actual intentionalism* on interpretation, reasonable assumptions on Conan Doyle's intentions justify a preference for the method of union. Currie (1990) opts instead for a form of *hypothetical intentionalism* that appeals to the beliefs about the fictional world of a fictional narrator. Lamarque (1990) goes for a related form of constructivist, *value-maximizing* hermeneutics. Unlike MP, any of them are apt to provide the missing explanation for Lewis's preference.

Even though MP still has some defenders (Alward, 2009; Hoffman, 2004; Recanati, 2021; cf. García-Carpintero 2022b for discussion), it is not the standard view of fiction among analytic philosophers anymore. This change is, I think, due to the deserved impact of Walton's (1990) groundbreaking work. Walton's view of fictions as *props* that prescribe imaginings given *principles of generation* rejects MP and the Report Model (Walton, 1990, p. 365), as much as DR does.<sup>20</sup> In Postscript A, Lewis welcomes Walton's work. He presents his reliance on MP as an 'artificial dodge' to deal with the Kripkean problem; Walton's view 'ties up ... some loose ends' (p. 276). I will argue that this is closer to the mark than perhaps he realized by examining recent representative examples of objections of the three varieties.

### 3.1 Narrator Objections

An objection I made in previous work (García-Carpintero, 2007, pp. 203–4; cf. Abell, 2020, §§2.5, 4.1), based on a half-a-page story by Cortázar, 'The Continuity of Parks', falls in this class. The plot features a reader immersed in what he takes to be a fictional story which, unbeknownst to him, narrates events unfolding while he reads, leading to his being killed offstage at the denouement. This is the core content of the fiction—a proposition that any competent reader must entertain for her to properly appreciate it. However, we obviously do not ascribe that content to the story by assuming it to be told 'as known fact'. Hypotheses that may explain how the novel's plot is enacted at the reader's world obtain at most in remote possible worlds; they conflict with the assumption that a teller is presenting contents that he knows. It is only because this is a fiction, with its specific commitments, that we are licensed to infer the content, by adopting an *external perspective*: fictional content is here grounded on the fact that the story is meant to afford an interesting imaginative project. We note the similarities between the worlds of the embedding and embedded fictions. We realize the import of 'continuity' in the title. We grasp the story's comment, when correctly interpreted, on the paradoxes of fictional immersion: like the protagonist, when engaging with fictions we 'suspend disbelief', although not so much as to really believe them; not even when, as in the story, the novel in which the protagonist is immersed *is* true and might give

19 The terms are Levinson's; see Levinson (2010) for his recent take on the distinction, and a good presentation of the views on *does mean* interpretation I am about to mention.

20 Walton rejects speech-act accounts too, though. His reasons are not convincing (Currie, 1990; Carroll, 1995). As he now accepts (Walton, 2015), his account is too revisionist, cf. García-Carpintero (2019). But here we do not need to choose among anti-MP views.

him vital information about events progressing as he reads. The story is thus directly offered by Cortázar, its author, for us to imagine, without any mediating reporting agency.<sup>21</sup>

Matravers acknowledges the worries that cases like this raise for the Report Model,<sup>22</sup> but neither he nor other promoters of MP have explained how fictional content is determined in these cases on that view.<sup>23</sup> They disprove that, *always*, ‘in reading a novel, a reader ... makes-believe the content of the novel is being reported to him as known fact by a narrator’. Lewis (1978, pp. 279–80, postscript D) considers the related case of Ugly Dave boasting and lying, instead of telling facts. To handle it, he suggests that in ‘these exceptional cases ... the thing to do is to consider those worlds where the act of storytelling really is whatever it purports to be – ravings, reliable translation of a reliable source, or whatever – here at our world’ (p. 266, fn. 7). This raises the *ad hocery* worry: this may be the thing to do, but why? Lewis (p. 280) himself notes a problem for his proposal, which underwrites the charge: if the story inside the story (Ugly Dave’s ravings) was told ‘as known fact’ too, then both worlds would collapse—as they do when the first-personal explicit narrator in *Don Quixote* reports what he took from another professed teller. What justifies the assumption that Ugly Dave is lying, which averts the collapse? Lewis admits not to have an answer (Lewis 1978, 280). In stark contrast, DR affords one—as before, depending on the nature of fictionalizing and *does mean* interpretations.

For a final consideration, as insisted on DR we do not need any fictional utterers: fictional contents may not be conveyed by the author portraying somebody’s speech acts, but directly by her act of fictionalizing—as the Cortázar example illustrates. DR stays away from Lewis’s ‘idealism’, which Byrne (1993) rightly questions. Films and drama are more problematic for the *ubiquitous teller* view that MP assumes, cf. García-Carpintero (2022c).

### 3.2 Generation Issues

Lewis takes each of his three analyses to capture intuitions on truth in fiction pointing in different directions; ANALYSIS 0 would capture those of *explicitists*, fn. 17. But any version of DR aptly assumed for the meta-semantics of fictional content would reject explicitism.

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- 21 Stories like Cortázar’s may have *storytelling* as opposed to *reporting narrators* (Walton, 1990, p. 368)—but I do not think it does. Phillips’ (1999) main point against Lewis is analogous; Hanley (2004, p. 116) is wrong to dismiss it. Pettersson (1993, p. 93) also makes the point against Currie’s (1990) version of the Report Model; García-Carpintero (2007, 210) argues that the Cortázar story rebuts it too. Köppe and Stühling (2015) provide yet another related argument for interpretations directly dependent on the fictionalizing goals of the author.
- 22 It ‘would be reasonable for a listener to conclude, were he told a supernatural tale such as *The Master and Margarita*, that the narrator was completely off his head and none of what he said was true; we all know that cats do not smoke cigars, neither are they dead shots with Mauser automatics’ (Matravers, 1997, p. 79).
- 23 Matravers (2014, p. 125) has since recanted on the Report Model. Zucchi (2021) explores the ‘zero option’—congenial to Matravers’ current views—that the generation of content is indifferent to illocutionary type, whether fiction or non-fiction. To deal with the differences that the cases just discussed reveal, he (Zucchi 2021, §4.3) appeals to differences in *genre* conventions. Both *genres* and illocutionary types are, in my view, social kinds (García-Carpintero 2021b); the issue is how to classify the ones at stake here. I would go with the second; Zucchi’s views align him instead with Stacie Friend’s proposals on these issues; cf. Friend (2021) and García-Carpintero (2021b) for recent discussion.

As shown, the core fictional content of Cortázar's *Continuity of Parks* is highly inexplicit. Wilson (2011, p. 57) similarly points out that we intuitively distinguish fictional contents that we 'see' (imaginatively visualize, really) in fiction films, from others that we do not. It is true in Almodóvar's 2002 *Talk to Her* that Benigno rapes the comatose Alicia; we do not 'see' this central plot element, but rather infer from what we do 'see' and 'hear'.

As indicated above, by adopting DR as our meta-semantics for fictional meaning we also avoid Lewis's 'idealistic' assumptions on the basic content of fictions. Primary contents do not need to be meta-linguistic; they may just characterize the non-linguistic fictional world. We can count obvious analytic inferences as primary also (D'Alessandro, 2016, p. 54), or even manifest conversational implicatures conveyed by a fictional narrator (Franzén, 2021, §4).<sup>24</sup> The literal contents of such utterances, as those by unreliable narrators, would not be primary simply because they are not part of fictional content.<sup>25</sup>

Some debates on the generation of implicit content concern the proper formulation of the *Reality* and *Mutual Belief* principles. Friend (2017a) argues for replacing the former with a *Reality Assumption* that 'everything that is (really) true is also fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work' (Friend 2017a, p. 29), as opposed to the counterfactual inferences from primary content that Lewis (1978), Wolterstorff (1980) and Walton (1990) favour. Other debates target the merits of those principles. Buttressing my main point, when the debates do not rely on meta-semantic views of how fictional content is fixed, they reduce to insoluble clashes of intuitions. Thus, Proudfoot (2006, pp. 11, 24) finds 'absurd' that facts about the Trump 2016 election are true in the Holmes canon—as the Reality Principle has it, if understood along Friend's (2017a) liberal lines—while Franzén (2021, §8) declares himself happy to live with this result.<sup>26</sup> Friend (2017b), Stock (2017, pp. 49–61) and Abell (2020, §4.1), in contrast, conduct critical discussions of Lewis's analyses aptly based on their respective ontologies of fictions. I disagree with some of their conclusions; but my point is that this is the only adequate way to pursue these debates.

### 3.3 Modal Concerns

Even though possible worlds are complete, Lewis can account for a measure of the intuitive indeterminacy of fictions by identifying 'the' fictional world with a plurality of them. This is how it is indeterminate in the Holmes canon that Inspector Lestrade's blood type is O (p. 270); in some fictional worlds it is; in some it is not.<sup>27</sup> Intuitively,

24 On this view, defeasible inferences like those derived from what the narrator ostensibly tells us would count as primary content, as Lewis assumed (1978, §2.4).

25 Cf. D'Alessandro (2016, 59). To round off fn. 17: DR is needed to discard as fictional contents the offerings of unreliable narrators; but it is inconsistent with explicitism.

26 If it does follow from the Reality Principle, which Franzén questions. One more illustration: McGregor (2015) discusses the case of a character in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the real communist André Marty. He agrees that some facts in Marty's biography may be imported to the fiction, but considers 'uncontroversial' (McGregor (2015, p. 349) that this extends to facts 'which Hemingway could not have possibly known at the time of writing'. Friend (2017a, 2017b) and Franzén (2021) show the non-controversiality to be arguable.

27 Woods (2018) rejects this indeterminacy by appealing to a radical form of epistemicism even more implausible than the original; cf. García-Carpintero (2020) for critical discussion.

however, fictions are indeterminate in another way that is not adequately captured thus: they may have several conflicting but equally well determined correct interpretations. Currie (1990, pp. 66–67) discusses the case of James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. Williams and Woodward (2021) mention that of whether Deckard is a replicant in Scott’s 1982 *Blade Runner*. Bowker (2021, §2.2) imagines two interpreters who turn equally good but conflicting responses on whether Asquith was Prime Minister when Holmes met Von Bork in the Holmes stories.

Hanley (2004, p. 117) contends that the interplay between Lewis’s methods of union and intersection suffices to explain any remaining indeterminacy, but Bowker (2021) argues that it does not. I think that Hanley is right. Williams and Woodward (2021, pp. 426–427) make a related distinction between a *permissivist* and a *prohibitionist* understanding of the incompleteness of fictions. On the first, when neither a proposition *p* nor its negation is true in a fiction, it is permissible to imagine one and it is permissible to imagine the other. This is the form of indeterminacy that the *method of union* models (García-Carpintero 2019, p. 271); some of the previous examples (like *The Turn of the Screw* and *Blade Runner*) can plausibly be treated like the case of Holmes’ wound. Cases involving ‘silly questions’ (p. 270) are better understood along prohibitionist lines, modelled by the *method of intersection* (García-Carpintero 2019, 2022c).<sup>28</sup> Which one is adequate for a given fiction can only be established by facts about correct interpretation and some adequate version of DR.

A better way to model this second incompleteness is to operate with ‘parts’ of possible worlds (Wolterstorff, 1980, pp. 131–134). If we do not think of worlds along Lewis’s realist view, but rather along *ersatzist* lines (Lewis, 1986), this becomes attractive. Appealing modelling tools come from recent developments of Lewis’s (1988) suggestions on the intuitive notion of *subject matter* or *aboutness*, cf. Plebani and Spolaore (2020). Here our atoms are not worlds but equivalence classes thereof—intuitively, those agreeing in their response to a question, as stated in a limited vocabulary. These proposals preserve what I described above (§2) as a crucial benefit of PWS; namely, that fictions in different media may share content.

Impossible fictions feature in frequent objections to Lewis; Proudfoot (2006) offers many examples. Given Lewis’s assumptions, everything would be true in an impossible fiction (p. 274). We have already presented Lewis’s proposals for dealing with them. The main problem for them lies in fictions for which ‘the contradiction is not eliminable without wholesale destruction of the story’ (Currie, 1990, p. 68): we cannot concoct consistent versions that remain close enough to the original. Priest (1997) devises a much-discussed example.

Hanley (2004), Nolan (2007) and Xhignesse (2016, 2020, 2021) offer similar reasons to resist this objection. Consider first the case of Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, which, perhaps carried away by an overzealous effort to find inconsistent fictions, Proudfoot (2006, p. 20)

28 On my view, Bowker’s (2021) *Interpreter A* takes the first option (in some good interpretations, Asquith is Prime Minister; in some others he is not), while his *Interpreter B* takes the second (he is not Prime Minister in any acceptable interpretation). This relies on my own version of DR; Williams and Woodward (2021) do not see their distinction as I do.

declares to have an impossible plot. But in fact it does not; to be sure, when we first read it we imagine that its fictional world features talking rabbits and thinking cards, but by the end we know that those conditions only occur in Alice's 'wonderful dream'. The fiction features a girl dreaming things not weirder than we sometimes do; we in fact need the Reality Principle to understand psychological aspects of her exchanges with its inhabitants like the emotions they arouse. There are other cases in which apparent impossibilities can be handled like this, by ascribing them to representational 'corpora' (Lewis, 1982) with impossible contents. Currie's (1990) account is just a version of this strategy, in which the inconsistencies are ascribed to the beliefs of the fictional implicit narrator that his account (questionably) poses.

But there is no good reason for applying this strategy across the board, as the philosophers just mentioned want. Kafka's fictions are oneiric. We thus should apply the Reality Principle to them wisely: we may use it to make inferences on the represented emotions (as we do with the emotions that Alice's dreams express), but not to prevent cards to (*per impossibile!*) think. Most lack any fictional dreamer, however; only the unwarranted application of the Report Model should lead us to distort them by positing one.

In support of their views, Hanley (2004, pp. 121–122) and Xhignesse (2016) provide good reasons to question the *Principle of Poetic License* that one can always write a story in which *p* is true, for any *p*. Its rejection is consistent with the main point I have been making. But no apt form of DR supports embedding all impossible fictional content into the intentional attitudes of a fictional character.<sup>29</sup> Tellingly, the *corpora* that this strategy posits are still representations, and hence we need some account of their impossible contents. Some of them are dreams, which Walton (1990, pp. 43–51) among others take to be paradigm cases of the very same *propositional* imaginative capacities deployed in properly understanding fictions.<sup>30</sup> It is only Lewis's (p. 275) modal ontology that makes impossible worlds suspect. *Ersatzist* modal foundations make good sense of them, and recent research provides illuminating formal models; Badura and Berto (2019) offer one. Like the 'small worlds' views mentioned above, it retains the crucial virtue of making contents sufficiently abstract.

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29 I thus agree with Wildman and Folde (2018), but not for their reasons. They assume an inchoate notion of what a fiction is, which trivializes the debate. If a fiction is just a class of propositions to be imagined, and we take the traditional view of propositional imagination mentioned in fn. 30 below, it is trivial that there are impossible fictions—it is also trivial that there are both *universal* and *empty* fictions (Wildman and Folde, 2017; Wildman, 2018). The non-trivial issue that I take Hanley (2004) and Xhignesse (2016) to be addressing is whether a good account of the nature of fictions allows for them, as (against them) I think it does. Wildman and Folde (2018, p. 325) in fact grant to Xhignesse that their argument does not establish this.

30 If propositional imaginings are nothing but acts of entertaining or considering propositions—as early researchers including Carroll (1995, pp. 98–99), Plantinga (1974, p. 62), Scruton (1974, 88ff.), and Wolterstorff (1980, pp. 219–234) assumed—the barriers that Xhignesse (2016, 2020, 2021) envisages for imagining contradictions simply evaporate. Imaginings are intentionally carried out for some goal. Some projects may make it unwise to imagine contradictions, or just untruths—for instance, those about making practical decisions. But this is compatible with other imaginative projects allowing for them, or even encouraging them—like making suppositions for *reductio ad absurdum*.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have reviewed appraisals of David Lewis's groundbreaking work on truth in fiction. We have an intuitive notion of *the plot* of a fiction, which we assume in our critical endeavours, professional or amateur, in paratextual uses. Lewis shows that this notion stands in need of philosophical elaboration by raising good questions without obvious answers: is there reflexive content about the fiction itself to be incorporated into the plot? To what extent is implicit content added to it, and what grounds it? Lewis is aware that meta-semantic justification for answers to these questions requires a metaphysics for fictions, and in the main text of his article, he relies on a dubious theory that was standard when he wrote: MP. Later however he pointed in the right direction, gesturing towards Walton's alternative view. I have been arguing that current research allows us to illuminatingly elaborate on his suggestions in this vein. The version that I favour validates most of his insights, including his pluralism on fictional content. This is not of course the place to provide a full evaluation, which would require going into the specifics of DR views. A full appraisal requires also examining how Lewisian accounts deal well with what was Lewis's main concern—namely, whether we can provide a semantics for fictional discourse without endorsing any form of Meinongianism. I defend a positive answer in a companion piece (García-Carpintero 2022a).

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