

Fictional Truth, Fictional Names: A Lewisian Approach

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The account of fictional truth proposed by David Lewis in his seminal 1978 paper “Truth in Fiction” remains of central importance to much contemporary discussion of this issue — namely, how we should analyse what is, so to speak, ‘true in a fiction’. Despite this, Lewis says relatively little about fictional names as such, nor have Lewis’s views on fictional names received much scholarly attention — surprising, given the extent to which the issues of fictional truth and fictional names overlap. In this paper I argue that Lewis’s account of fictional truth forces us to adopt an account of fictional names as non-rigid designators, whose reference is fixed satisfactorily at a given world. However, as such, I argue that Lewis’s account is vulnerable to challenges analogous to Kripke’s criticisms of classical descriptivism: namely, that this account is seemingly incompatible with intuitively coherent patterns of ‘counter-fictional’ reasoning.

1 Introduction

For as long as names have been considered a worthy subject of philosophical inquiry — that is, at least, since Frege — fictional names have posed a problem: we can say seemingly true things with fictional names, which seemingly do not refer to any individual (at least, not to any ordinary individual). How can this be?¹

The solutions to this problem bifurcate along the lines of this tension. In order to resolve the problem, we could allow that fictional names do (or, at least, can) refer — but then to what do they refer? Alternatively, we could reject the possibility of saying true things with fictional names — but then how are we to explain our seeming ability to do just that?

In this paper I will trace the route through this garden of forking paths followed by David Lewis in his seminal paper “Truth in Fiction,”² pausing briefly to justify his choices at each junction. I will then consider how the commitments Lewis makes lay the groundwork for a plausible account of fictional names. However, I argue that such an account faces some robust difficulties. I leave it open to the reader to decide whether, in light of these difficulties, we ought to prefer to continue down this path.

¹Gottlob Frege, “Über Sinn und Bedeutung,” *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik* 100 (1892): 25–50. Translated as “On Sense and Reference” in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. and trans. Max Black and Peter Geach (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

²David Lewis, “Truth in Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1978): 37–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20009693>.

2 A Problem of Fictional Names

We can say seemingly true things with fictional names. Consider this simple comprehension question on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

(1) Hamlet is Danish.

This sentence seems true. If a student, say, were to utter (1), in the context of a discussion about *Hamlet*, we should (plausibly) take them to have said something true.³

If we follow the surface grammar of (1), we may take it as having the grammatical form of a typical subject-predicate sentence: ascribing a property — being Danish — to an individual, referred to by means of a proper name, 'Hamlet'. A standard truth-conditional analysis of such a sentence would hold that it is true if and only if the referent of the name satisfies the property expressed by the predicate.

However, it is tempting to suggest that, almost axiomatically, *fictional names* like 'Hamlet' do not refer to anyone — if they did, they would not be genuine *fictional names*.⁴ A standard treatment of proper names would hold that a proper name (on an occasion of use) refers to an individual by virtue of being part of a name-using practice, originating in that individual being dubbed with that name.⁵ However, almost by definition, our use of the name 'Hamlet' did not originate in some person being dubbed with the name. We might be tempted to say, then, that Shakespeare "just made up the name:"⁶ it does not refer to any individual; it is an empty name.

We have an obvious tension here: if 'Hamlet' does not refer to anyone, it cannot be that the referent of 'Hamlet' satisfies the property expressed by the predicate 'is Danish'; so (1) cannot be true.

This tension can be spelled out in three claims:

- (A)** The sentence 'Hamlet is Danish' is true.
- (B)** The name 'Hamlet' does not refer to any individual.
- (C)** The sentence 'Hamlet is Danish' is true iff: (i) 'Hamlet' refers to some individual; and, (ii) the referent of 'Hamlet' satisfies the property expressed by 'is Danish'.

All three claims are intuitively plausible; however, as I hope is clear, they cannot all be held in conjunction.

³Graham Priest, "Sylvan's Box: a Short Story and Ten Morals," *Notre Dame journal of Formal Logic* 38, no. 4 (1997): 573-582. This use of a 'comprehension test' is inspired by Priest.

⁴We assume here and throughout that 'Hamlet' is a paradigmatic example of a genuine *fictional name*.

⁵Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1981). This standard treatment follows a rough *causal picture of reference*, as popularised by Kripke.

⁶David Kaplan, "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice," in *Approaches to Natural Language*, ed. Jaakko Hintikka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1973), 505.

This tension is not unique to the name ‘Hamlet’. Fictional names pose a general problem for semantic analysis, as we can use them to ascribe properties to fictional characters; making (seemingly) true claims, despite their (seemingly) failing to refer.

3 Do Fictional Names Refer?

Many suggested resolutions to this tension start by rejecting B, holding that fictional names like ‘Hamlet’ do refer — though not to ordinary flesh-and-blood persons. Such solutions may (broadly) be described as ‘realist’, insofar as they hold that — *ontologically* speaking — there are such things as fictional characters, and that fictional names refer to these characters.⁷ However, we should then ask: if fictional characters are ‘real’, and fictional names refer to them, what sort of thing are they — metaphysically speaking? Within this broad ontological ‘realist’ position, there is significant divergence in answering this metaphysical question.⁸

One common ‘realist’ approach is to follow the Meinongian line that fictional characters are *non-existent* individuals.⁹ Parsons summarises such a position:

“Sherlock Holmes, for example, is an object that is a detective, solves crimes, ..., and doesn’t exist. His nonexistence doesn’t prevent him from having (in the actual world) quite ordinary properties, such as being a detective.”¹⁰

This, however, is chiefly a negative thesis — fictional characters are not existent. We should be inclined to ask the Meinongian for some positive metaphysical thesis to supplement this claim. Again, suggestions on such positive theses diverge. Parsons, for instance, holds that fictional characters (qua non-existents) are “concrete correlates of sets of properties;”¹¹ in contrast, Zalta and Stokke maintain that fictional characters are “roles” or “individual concepts,” specified by sets of properties.¹²

If these suggestions are already beginning to look too metaphysically obscure for our tastes, we might prefer to backtrack a little, and consider an alternative realist line. The most common such alternative would, likely, follow the thesis that fictional characters are *abstract* individuals. Again, such a thesis is primarily negative — fictional characters are *not* concrete — and ought to be supplemented with some positive metaphysical

⁷However, in order to knit with our intuitions, such fictional characters must be different in kind to ordinary flesh-and-blood people.

⁸Amie Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Thomasson draws this distinction between the *ontological* and *metaphysical* issues of fictional characters: ‘are there such things as fictional characters?’; and (if so), ‘what kind of thing is a fictional character?’.

⁹Fred Kroon and Alberto Voltolini, “Fictional Entities,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/fictional-entities>; Andreas Stokke, “Fictional Names and Individual Concepts,” *Synthese* (2020): 1-31. Per Kroon and Voltolini, and Stokke, we should be careful about attributing any of these views too stringently to Meinong himself. Rather, we say that these views are broadly “Meinongian.”

¹⁰Terence Parsons, “Fregean theories of fictional objects,” *Topoi* 1 (1982): 81.

¹¹Parsons; Kroon and Voltolini.

¹²Edward N. Zalta, *Abstract Objects: An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983); Andreas Stokke, “Fictional Names and Individual Concepts.”

claim. Thomasson is a forceful defender of one such thesis,¹³ arguing that fictional characters are *artifacts*: “created, dependent abstracta present in the actual world”;¹⁴ “created objects dependent on such entities as authors and stories.”¹⁵

I will not consider the relative merits of these metaphysical options here. There are, however, as noted by Martin and Schotch, general reasons to be wary of adopting any such ontologically realist line.¹⁶ For one, all such lines are ontologically costly, requiring that we accept an ontology containing not only ordinary, concrete, existent individuals, but some other sort(s) of individuals too (e.g. *non-existents*, or *abstracta*). If available, a solution to the problem which did not require such ontological commitments might be considered theoretically preferable. Second, even granting such ontological commitments, we may (reasonably) be sceptical of the legitimacy of attributing ordinary properties — such as being a detective, or being prince of Denmark — to these ‘*metaphysically-other*’ individuals. Such attributions, however, are necessary to preserve the intuitive truth-value of sentences like (1).¹⁷

Considering the thorny issues which lie in store, should we venture down the realist path, we may be inclined to choose an alternative ‘anti-realist’ track. The starting point for any such track would be to uphold B — our original intuition, that fictional names do not refer (to any kind of individual). Since this ‘anti-realism’ amounts to a dismissal of the ontological question, the difficult metaphysical questions which troubled the realist simply do not arise. However, by upholding B, the anti-realist is forced to conclude that (1) is not true (at least, not strictly speaking).

What Lewis attempts to show,¹⁸ first of all, is that there is a path available to the anti-realist which allows them to uphold $\neg A$ and B, and yet give a satisfying explanation of the intuitive truth of (1). He argues that it is available to us to say that, although (1) is not strictly true, it can be used to say something true. More precisely, he claims, when someone uses or utters the phrase “Hamlet is Danish,” we may (in certain contexts) take them to have implicitly asserted, not (1), but the more complex sentence:

(2) In *Hamlet*, Hamlet is Danish.

We draw an implicit distinction here between what a speaker *utters* — *the precise words they use* — and what they *assert* — very roughly, *the point they express*.

In effect, the addition of the prefix ‘In *Hamlet*...’ makes explicit that the claim being asserted is *metafictional*: it does not concern what is true *simpliciter*, but rather what

¹³Amie Thomasson, “Fiction, Modality and Dependent Abstracta,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 84, no. 2 (1996): 295-320; “Speaking of Fictional Characters,” *Dialectica* 57, no. 2 (2003): 205-223.

¹⁴Thomasson, “Fiction, Modality and Dependent Abstracta”, 296.

¹⁵Thomasson, 301. For others, see: John Searle, “The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (1975): 319-332; Peter van Inwagen, “Creatures of Fiction,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (1977): 299-308, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20009682>; Nathan Salmon, “Nonexistence,” *Noûs* 32, no. 3 (1998): 277-319; Saul Kripke, *Reference and Existence: The John Locke Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶Robert M. Martin and Peter K. Schotch, “The Meaning of Fictional Names,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 26, no. 5 (1974): 378.

¹⁷Kripke, *Reference and Existence*. Kripke maintains such a view: broadly, that fictional characters are abstract objects, but that — as such — they are not eligible to satisfy ordinary properties such as being Danish, or being a detective; instead they satisfy fictional-analogues of ordinary properties, such as being *fictionally-Danish*, or being a *fictional detective*.

¹⁸Lewis, “Truth in Fiction.”

is ‘true-in-*Hamlet*’.¹⁹ Though (1) is not true *simpliciter*, it is true-in-*Hamlet*; or true, when situated within the scope of the prefix ‘In *Hamlet*...’.

This may be used as a general strategy for understanding metafictional discourse: we may take seemingly straightforward utterances as (abbreviated) *metafictional assertions* — implicitly prefixed with an operator of the form ‘In such-and-such a fiction...’ (or, a *fiction-operator*).²⁰

This path leaves us with the following commitments:

- (¬A) The sentence ‘Hamlet is Danish’ is **not** true.
- (B) The name ‘Hamlet’ does not refer to any individual.
- (C) The sentence ‘Hamlet is Danish’ is true iff: (i) ‘Hamlet’ refers to some individual; and, (ii) the referent of ‘Hamlet’ satisfies the property expressed by ‘is Danish’.
- (D) An utterance or use of the phrase “Hamlet is Danish” may (in some contexts) be taken as an (abbreviated) assertion of the sentence ‘In *Hamlet*, Hamlet is Danish’.²¹
- (E) The sentence ‘In *Hamlet*, Hamlet is Danish’ is true.

4 How should we analyse (2)?

The question which then presents itself is: how should we analyse (2)? Since we are committed to the claim that (2) is true, what are its truth-conditions?

4.1 How should we analyse the fiction-operator, ‘In *Hamlet*...’?

We may begin by considering the fiction-operator, ‘In *Hamlet*...’. As should be clear on consideration, the operator ‘In *Hamlet*...’ is not truth-functional: we cannot determine the truth-value of a sentence ‘In *Hamlet*, ϕ ’ as a function of the truth-value of the embedded sentence ϕ .

¹⁹Stokke: 2. I borrow this concept of *metafictional* discourse from Stokke: “On its metafictional use [a sentence] is used to say something about what is true in [a] story.”

²⁰Moves along these lines abound in the literature. See: Martin and Schotch; Gregory Currie, “Fictional Truth,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 50, no. 2 (1986): 195-212; Alex Byrne, “Truth in fiction: The story continued,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71, no. 1 (1993): 24-35; John F. Phillips, “Truth and Inference in Fiction,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 94, no. 3 (1999): 273-293, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4320938>; Diane Proudfoot, “Possible Worlds Semantics and Fiction,” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 35 (2006): 9-40; Stacie Friend, “The great beetle debate: a study in imagining with names,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 153, no. 2 (2011): 183-211; Stokke.

²¹Lewis: 38. How are we to decide when an utterance is to be taken as a metafictional assertion, implicitly prefixed by some fiction-operator? As Lewis says, “context, content, and common sense will usually resolve the ambiguity.” Comprehension tests, like that with which we began, are useful for necessitating metafictional discourse.

Lewis's suggestion starts from the point of regarding 'In *Hamlet*...' as a modal operator. This analysis allows Lewis to treat metafictional discourse from within the (already developed) framework of a *possible world semantics*, of which he is a noted advocate. The key tenet of such a framework is that modal discourse — about possibility and necessity — should be understood and interpreted as discourse about possible worlds, and possible individuals.

Lewis subscribes to the view that modal discourse involving the notions of *possibility* and *necessity* is inherently opaque (without clear truth-conditions or standards of validity). He holds that this opaqueness can only be dissolved by giving truth-conditional analyses of modal sentences in terms of quantification over possible worlds.²² In particular, the modal operators 'necessarily' and 'possibly' should be translated as universal and existential quantifiers, ranging over a domain of possible worlds.

Similarly, Lewis suggests that fiction-operators should be interpreted as "*relative necessity operators*," and analysed as "*restricted universal quantifiers over possible worlds*."²³ More intuitively, the fiction-operator 'In *Hamlet*...' serves to identify some relevant domain of possible worlds; and the truth-value of a sentence of the form 'In *Hamlet*, ϕ ' is determined by the truth-value of the embedded sentence ϕ at each world in the relevant domain.

This analysis outlines an approach for defining truth-conditions for sentences within the scope of fiction-operators. The Lewisian suggestion can be stated as follows:

- (F) For any sentence ϕ 'In *Hamlet*, ϕ ' is true iff ϕ is true at each of some set of possible worlds ("this set being somehow determined by *Hamlet*").²⁴

This approach has a couple of obvious advantages. Firstly, there is something intuitively satisfying about identifying truth-in-*Hamlet* with truth at some possible worlds. We often have recourse to talk about 'the world of the fiction', or of storytelling as a 'world-building' exercise. Lewis's approach directly echoes this picture.²⁵ Secondly, analysing 'In *Hamlet*...' as a restricted universal quantifier over possible worlds allows discourse about truth-in-*Hamlet* to be subsumed into a general possible world semantics, with clear and definite standards of valid inference.

In addition to $\neg A - E$, we now find ourselves committed to the additional claim:

- (G) For any sentence ϕ , 'In *Hamlet*, ϕ ' is true iff ϕ is true at each of some set of possible worlds (which we may denote ' Δ ').

²²David Lewis, "Anselm and Actuality," in *Philosophical Papers Volume I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 10. "The standards of validity for modal reasoning have long been unclear; they become clear only when we provide a semantic analysis of modal logic by reference to possible worlds and to possible things therein."

²³Lewis, "Truth in Fiction:" 39.

²⁴Lewis: 38. We ought really to specify a type of modality here, in virtue of which a world is *possible*. It is clear from Lewis's work that the relevant type is *logical* or *metaphysical* modality. As such, when we describe a world as 'possible', we should understand that as meaning '*logically* or *metaphysically* possible'.

²⁵In general, fictions do not specify enough to determine a single possible world as 'the world of the fiction'. Worlds are *complete* — they settle every question. As such, there are otherwise identical worlds, differing only in Ophelia's blood type. Which of these is *the* world of *Hamlet*? It seems arbitrary to choose between them.

4.2 How should we analyse the embedded sentence, (1)?

The analysis of the operator ‘In *Hamlet*...’ given in G, in conjunction with our existing commitment E, imply a further commitment:

(H) The sentence ‘Hamlet is Danish’ is true at each possible world in the set Δ .

As should be apparent, in order to make sense of this claim, we must think of (1) not as having a single truth-value, but as only having a truth-value *at a world* (or, relative to a state of affairs).²⁶ For instance, we may say that, even though (1) is false at *the actual world* (denoted ‘@’), it may be true at *some other possible world*, or at each of some set of worlds.

However, in order to allow the truth-value of (1) to vary between worlds, we must also relativise its *truth-conditions* to a world. As such, as (1) contains a singular term and a predicate, we must also relativise the relations of *reference* and *property-satisfaction* to worlds.

In this vein, drawing on the standard analysis of (1) given in C, we may say that (1) is true **at a world w** if and only if the referent of ‘Hamlet’ **at w** satisfies the property expressed by ‘is Danish’ **at w**. This states a further commitment:

(I) The sentence ‘Hamlet is Danish’ is true at a world w iff: (i) ‘Hamlet’ refers to some individual at w; and, (ii) the referent of ‘Hamlet’ at w satisfies the property expressed by ‘Danish’ at w.

From H and I, follows a further commitment:

(J) For any possible world w in the set Δ : (i) ‘Hamlet’ refers to some individual at w; and, (ii) the referent of ‘Hamlet’ at w satisfies the property expressed by ‘is Danish’ at w.

5 How should we analyse the reference-conditions of ‘Hamlet’?

This commitment raises a further question: what are the (world-relative) reference-fixing conditions for ‘Hamlet’: what conditions must obtain for ‘Hamlet’ to refer to an individual (at a world)?

²⁶Strictly speaking, we should also relativise the truth of (2) to a world, by means of an *accessibility* relation. Lewis does not consider this: he is only concerned (as we will be here) with the semantics of fiction-operators with respect to the actual world.

5.1 Ordinary Proper Names

In many ways, ‘Hamlet’ looks and behaves like an ordinary proper name. The standard treatment of such ‘ordinary’ proper names (viz. reference and modality), popularised by Kripke,²⁷ comprises two elements. First, the reference of an ‘ordinary’ proper name (on an occasion of use) is determined at the actual world, by means of something like the *causal picture of reference* we considered earlier. Second, when considered with respect to other possible worlds, an ‘ordinary’ proper name refers at any world to the individual to whom it refers at the actual world: ‘ordinary’ proper names are *rigid designators* (across possible worlds). (As Kripke demonstrated, this property of rigidity is central to our ability to engage in modal reasoning using proper names.)²⁸

This property of rigidity can be spelled out in the following claim:

- (K)** For any ordinary proper name ‘ α ’, any world w , and any individual x : ‘ α ’ refers to x at w if and only if ‘ α ’ refers to x at @.

As Kaplan observes,²⁹ a natural corollary of this claim is as follows:

- (L)** For any ordinary proper name ‘ α ’: if ‘ α ’ does not refer to any individual at @, then ‘ α ’ does not refer to any individual at any world.

As such, if we were to treat ‘Hamlet’ as an ordinary proper name (*qua* rigid designator), then it follows, from B and L, that ‘Hamlet’ does not refer to any individual at any possible world. The only way to reconcile this conclusion with J, would be to hold that the set Δ is empty. However, this conclusion, in conjunction with F, would make every sentence *vacuously* true-in-Hamlet.

Seemingly, then, the only way to reconcile our Lewisian analysis of fiction-operators as modal operators, with an interpretation of fictional names as rigid designators, would be to completely obscure the distinction between fictional truths and fictional falsities.³⁰

As such, in order to hold on to our existing commitments, we must treat fictional names differently from ‘ordinary’ proper names (on the standard Kripkean treatment): a move which raises a suspicion of *ad hoc*-ness.

Moreover, realist approaches are, at least in theory, compatible with an interpretation of fictional names as rigid designators. Such approaches, therefore, seem to constitute a more promising option for providing a uniform semantical account of fictional and

²⁷ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*

²⁸ David Lewis, “Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 5 (1968): 113-126. This concept of rigidity relies on a primitive notion of trans-world identity for individuals. Lewis is critical of this notion, preferring to explicate talk of transworld identity by means of his *Counterpart Theory*, a primary tenet of which is that no individual can inhabit more than one world. However, in “Truth in Fiction” he adopts the conventional language of transworld identity, which we use here.

²⁹ Kaplan, 502

³⁰ It is important to note that this is simply a consequence of Lewis’s analysis of fiction-operators as *modal* operators, and of fictional names as being used meaningfully within the scope of these modals. It does not depend on the finer points of Lewis’s analyses, and applies equally to any way he might flesh out the restriction on possible worlds, Δ .

'ordinary' names. Such uniformity would, plausibly, be considered a theoretical value. Thomasson,³¹ and Adams, et al.³², both attempt to offer such uniform accounts.

5.2 Descriptivism

Given that, as we have seen, a Lewisian analysis of fiction-operators as modal operators is essentially incompatible with an interpretation of fictional names as rigid-designators, we find ourselves in need of an alternative analysis of fictional names: one which assigns them non-rigid (world-relative) reference-fixing conditions.

One potentially attractive suggestion might be to let the reference of the name 'Hamlet' be fixed (at a world) *satisfactionally*, by the descriptions given of Hamlet in *Hamlet*. Approaches along these lines are given by Martin and Schotch, and Currie,³³ amongst others.

With some degree of idealisation, we can extract from the text of *Hamlet* some set of attributes, relations and deeds ascribed to the character Hamlet. Such a set might include the following: 'is Danish'; 'is a prince'; 'is slain by a poisoned blade', etc. Intuitively, we can regard such a set of descriptions as constructing a specification, or a 'sketch', of the character Hamlet. A very general outline of a descriptivist approach to resolving the reference-conditions of 'Hamlet' might, then, be to say that 'Hamlet' refers to an individual at a world if and only if that individual matches this 'sketch' of Hamlet at that world.

There are numerous ways this broad condition may be fleshed-out. We might say, for instance, that 'Hamlet' refers to an individual at a world if that individual satisfies **all** the descriptions given of Hamlet in *Hamlet* at that world; or some **majority** of these descriptions; or **best** matches the inferred 'sketch' (of the individuals available at that world). We shall not worry about this here.

A version of this descriptivist suggestion can be stated broadly as follows (with the necessary addition of a *uniqueness* condition):

(M) For any world *w*, and any individual *x*: 'Hamlet' refers to *x* at *w* if and only if *x* uniquely satisfies all (or most) of the descriptions given of Hamlet in *Hamlet*.

This suggestion, however, has a rather disquieting consequence — the observation of which is due to Kripke.³⁴ Consider: we can perfectly well imagine discovering that some individual actually existed, who uniquely satisfied all or most of the descriptions given of Hamlet in *Hamlet*. In Lewis's words, this imagined individual "had the attributes, stood in the relations, and did the deeds" ascribed to Hamlet in *Hamlet*. Would this individual then be Hamlet? Would the name 'Hamlet' — *as we use it* — refer to him?

³¹Amie Thomasson, "The Reference of Fictional Names," *Kriterion* 6 (1993): 3-12, <http://www.kriterion-journal-of-philosophy.org/kriterion/issues/Kriterion-1993-06/Kriterion-1993-06-03-12-thomasson.pdf>.

³²Fred Adams, Gary Fuller and Robert Stecker, "The Semantics of Fictional Names," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997): 128-148.

³³Gregory Currie, *The Nature of Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³⁴Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*.

If we hold a condition like M, and allow the reference of ‘Hamlet’ to be fixed satisfactorily (at a world), then we should have to answer in the affirmative. Such an individual would, indeed, be Hamlet. Our name ‘Hamlet’ would refer to him. This, however, may not be a welcome conclusion. Kripke and Lewis both find it intolerable.³⁵ Nevertheless, there is no absolute consensus on this claim, with Martin and Schotch, for instance, who advocate for something like the satisfactorial account just given, opting to bite the bullet in the face of this Kripkean challenge.

5.3 A Lewisian Hybrid

Lewis offers a further alternative to these two treatments. His view is, in essence, a hybrid, holding, with the descriptivist, that fictional names are non-rigid, but following Kripke in denying that matching the ‘sketch’ of Hamlet is sufficient for being Hamlet (or being the referent of the name ‘Hamlet’).³⁶

His suggestion can best be explained and motivated by considering what one might take to be wrong with the previous descriptivist suggestion. Let us consider the problem again: we can well imagine discovering that some individual actually existed matching the ‘sketch’ of Hamlet. Would this individual *be* Hamlet?

“Surely not!”, says Lewis.³⁷ But why not? Lewis’s reaction, I believe, stems from an implicit assumption of a broadly *causal* picture of reference, whereby names refer to individuals (on an occasion of use) in virtue of being part of a name-using practice originating in that individual being dubbed with the name.

As Kaplan says, however, in the case of fictional names, this is simply not the case.³⁸ The name ‘Hamlet’, as we use it, does not refer to any individual, because it does not originate in some individual being dubbed with the name — rather, Shakespeare just made it up. The possibility of a Hamlet-doppelgänger is irrelevant: if our name ‘Hamlet’ did not originate in their being dubbed with the name, then the name does not refer to them.

We can co-opt the metaphor of the sketch here, to good effect. Just as a literal sketch is not a sketch *of* a particular individual by virtue of that individual bearing a likeness to the sketch, so someone is not the referent of our name ‘Hamlet’ in virtue of matching the ‘sketch’. A sketch is *of* an individual in virtue of bearing some causal, intentional relationship to that individual. Similarly, an individual is the referent of a name, like ‘Hamlet’, in virtue of some bearing causal, intentional relation to the name.³⁹

On these grounds, Lewis, as I read him, would hold that we can imagine discovering that Hamlet really existed; or that the name ‘Hamlet’, as we use it, *does* refer to an

³⁵Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*; Lewis, “Truth in Fiction.”

³⁶Lewis says relatively little about fictional names as such. My reading of him here draws primarily from his reflections on fictions being “told as known fact.”

³⁷Lewis: 39.

³⁸Kaplan, 505

³⁹Kripke uses a similar metaphor in motivating his causal picture.

actual person. Consider: we can imagine discovering that Shakespeare did not write *Hamlet* as a work of fiction, but as a factual biography of a real Danish prince and his tragic demise. We can imagine that some individual actually existed who “had the attributes, stood in the relations, and did the deeds” ascribed in *Hamlet* to Hamlet and that Shakespeare wrote the story *Hamlet* about this individual. We should be inclined to say, then, that our use of the name ‘Hamlet’ is part of a name-using practice originating in this individual being dubbed with the name — either by Shakespeare, or previous to his usage.

Such a scenario, we assume, is not actual; but it is conceivable, and therefore describes a possible world — a possible world where the story *Hamlet* is told, just as it is at the actual world, but where it is “told as known fact.”⁴⁰ This, roughly, then, is Lewis’s suggestion:

(N) For any world w , and any individual x : ‘Hamlet’ refers to x at w iff *Hamlet* is truly told *about* x at w .⁴¹

There is reason to be sceptical of such a hybrid view. Lewis concedes, as his modal analysis requires of him, that fictional names are non-rigid. They are, as such, distinctly unlike ‘ordinary’ proper names, at least in their modal profile. His rejection of the descriptivist suggestion, however, seems to be rooted in a tacit subscription to the sort of causal picture of reference which Kripke endorses for proper names. What may be a little unclear to us is, if Lewis already distinguishes between fictional and ordinary names with respect to rigidity, why should we credit the analogy with regards their actual reference-fixing conditions?

6 A Further Problem

A further problem emerges here, threatening both the descriptivist and the Lewisian lines. We may observe that, despite their differences in content, the reference-fixing conditions given by M and N share the same formal structure:

(O) For any world w , and any individual x : ‘Hamlet’ refers to x at w iff x uniquely satisfies some condition ζ at w .

Both conditions are, in essence, satisfactional. However, as such, they are both vulnerable to particular criticisms, analogous to those Kripke makes of classical descriptivism.⁴² In defending his rigid designation thesis, Kripke argues that certain coherent patterns of modal reasoning are fundamentally incompatible with a treatment (per classical descriptivism) of ordinary proper names as disguised definite descriptions. For example, we may coherently reason (modally) about Aristotle not writing the *Nicomachean*

⁴⁰Lewis: 40.

⁴¹Lewis relies here on a notion of trans-world identity for stories — that one and the same story should be told at different worlds as fiction and as known fact. As he admits, he does not give clear criteria for this identity.

⁴²Kripke, Naming and Necessity.

Ethics, or about Gödel not authoring the incompleteness theorems. However, if the reference of ‘Aristotle’ were fixed (partly) by the description ‘the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics*’, it would follow that the sentence:

(3) Aristotle wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

is a necessary truth: true at all possible worlds. This is plainly inadmissible.

An analogous objection is available here, against satisfactional theories of fictional names: if we let the reference of a fictional name be fixed by a description, then intuitively coherent patterns of “counter-fictional reasoning,” as Friend calls it,⁴³ come out as automatically false.

For example, we may hypothesise about what might have happened, had Hamlet attempted to resolve his feud with Claudius by less clandestine means;⁴⁴ we conjecture as to whether Frodo Baggins making more liberal use of the Great Eagles would have expedited his journey to Mordor, or whether it would have disclosed his mission to Sauron.⁴⁵ These conjectures are perfectly coherent. In fact, they are a key part of how we engage with fiction. Students in literature classes are not only expected to answer simple comprehension questions, but to be able to engage in genuine discussion about fictional *might-have-beens*.

However, if we hold, along the descriptivist line, that the references of fictional names are fixed by the set of descriptions given of the character in the fiction, then sentences like:

(4) Hamlet’s feud drives him to insanity.

should be taken as necessary truths — since, by definition, there can be no possible worlds where the referent of the name ‘Hamlet’ is not driven to insanity.

By a similar token, if we follow the Lewisian hybrid line, and hold that, at any world *w*, ‘Hamlet’ refers to an individual *x* if and only if *Hamlet* is truly told about *x* at *w*, then we should (plausibly) also take (4) as a necessary truth — since *Hamlet* cannot be truly told of an individual who is not driven to insanity.

Seemingly, then, such satisfactional theories of fictional names are fundamentally at odds with our ability to engage in coherent and significant counter-fictional reasoning. Resolutions to this tension may be available, but it is no easy task.

⁴³Friend: 189.

⁴⁴James D. Carney, “Fictional Names,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 32, no. 4 (1977): 384.

⁴⁵Tom Schoonen and Franz Berto, “Reasoning About Fiction,” (Preprint version), 2018, <https://tomschoonen.com/content/1-research/schoonen-ber-to-2018-reasoning-about-fiction.pdf>.

7 Conclusion

The commitments deriving from the Lewisian analysis of fiction-operators force us to consider the issue of the reference-fixing conditions for the name ‘Hamlet’. We dismissed the possibility of treating ‘Hamlet’ on the model of ordinary proper names, holding instead that fictional names must be non-rigid designators, in order to cohere with our modal analysis of fiction-operators. We considered a possible descriptivist solution, taking the reference of ‘Hamlet’ to be fixed satisfactorily by the descriptions given of Hamlet in *Hamlet*. However, we saw that taking such a line would lead to a potentially unpalatable conclusion. In light of this, we considered a hybrid of the previous two positions: an alternative which I think best represents the position Lewis takes in “Truth in Fiction”. However, we raised concerns that this hybrid might be less a best-of-both option than a confused amalgam.

We also noted a further problem affecting both the descriptivist approach and the Lewisian hybrid view, on the model of Kripke’s criticisms of descriptivism: namely, that these approaches seem fundamentally at odds with our ability to engage in seemingly coherent counter-fictional reasoning. How serious is this problem? I leave this question open. The reader may decide, given the balance of commitments required to pursue this anti-realist line, whether this line is still preferable to the realist alternative.

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