

Fiction and Reality

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Abstract

- I shall focus on the issue of whether and in what sense a real and concrete entity, e.g., Napoleon, London, the earth or the sun, can be characters of a fictional story, and conversely whether and in what sense characters of fictional stories such as the Napoleon of *War and Peace* or the London of a *A study in Scarlet* can be identified with the real Napoleon and the real London, respectively.
- I shall evaluate the contrasting arguments offered by Hector-Neri Castañeda and Andrea Bonomi; according to the former, a fictional character and a real entity can be one and the same, whereas, according to the latter, this can never be the case.
- This will take me to an exploration of the very notion of what counts as a fictional story and of what it is for something to be a character of a fictional story.
- On the basis of this exploration, I shall assess the opposed views by Castañeda and Bonomi, and defend a view that occupies some sort of middle ground.

Preview

- Two primordial and contrasting intuitions
 - Castañeda
 - Bonomi
- What is a story?
- How can a fictum and a real object be characters of a story?
- Have the cake and eat it to

Two primordial and contrasting intuitions

Castañeda
Bonomi

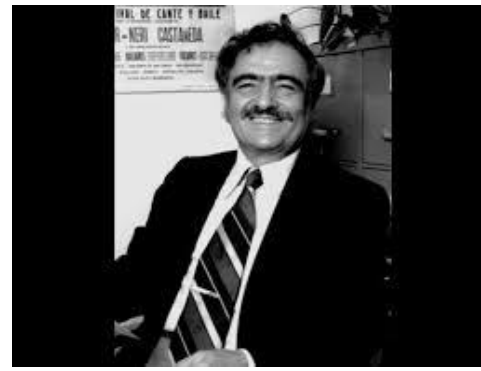
Inventing a story about this or that

- Primordial intuition 1: I can imagine whatever I want *about* you and I, Trento, Donald Trump, Sergio Mattarella, ...
- "Trento became part of Austria after WWI and Sergio Mattarella was born there ..."

Stories and characters are abstract

- Primordial intuition 2: real objects are concrete and located in space-time. Fictional characters are as abstract as the stories in which they belong. How can a real object ever be a character?

Castañeda



- "Fiction and reality: their fundamental connections" (1979)
- *Thinking Language and Experience* (1989)
- "*Many stories are about real objects*: there are tales about national heroes, ..., pseudo-historical novels, ... satires and ironic fables, ... they all depend crucially on an identification of persons, objects and events of the real world with an identification of persons, objects and events with the satires and fables in question"
- The "startling case": part of the novel *There is future* by Hans Kraut coincides word by word with part of the report by the journalist Philip McJohn. Don't they both speak of the same Pamela who lives at 123 Oak street in Martinsville?

Bonomi



- *Lo spirito della narrazione* (1994)
- Deictics used in a fictional text do not refer to items in real space-time (but rather in a narrative space-time).
- And without links to deictic reference to items in reality no singular term can be taken to refer to an item in reality
 - "for a long time I went to bed early". "I" does not refer to Proust and there is no reference to a time before the writing time (as the past tense might suggest).
 - BUT WHY NOT?

Bonomi (cont.)

- "il tempo narrato" in Bonomi e Zucchi, *Tempo e linguaggio* (2001)
- **Argument of downward indeterminacy:** suppose "London" referred to the real London. Then we should be able to identify in London the space where the house of Holmes is located. Perhaps we can, since Doyle gives us the address 221B Baker street, although there is a bank there. We can go further however. We should be able to identify in London the space where Holmes' bedroom is located. But Doyle gives us no indication about its location and so it is impossible. Hence, the real London cannot be the London of the story.

A place for Holmes' bedroom?

- But why should it follow? It is only the case that not all that is said about London in the story is true. In the story, London is such that there is a house at 221B Baker Street and there is a bedroom in that house. In fact, London is such that there is a bank at 221B Baker Street and there is no bedroom there.



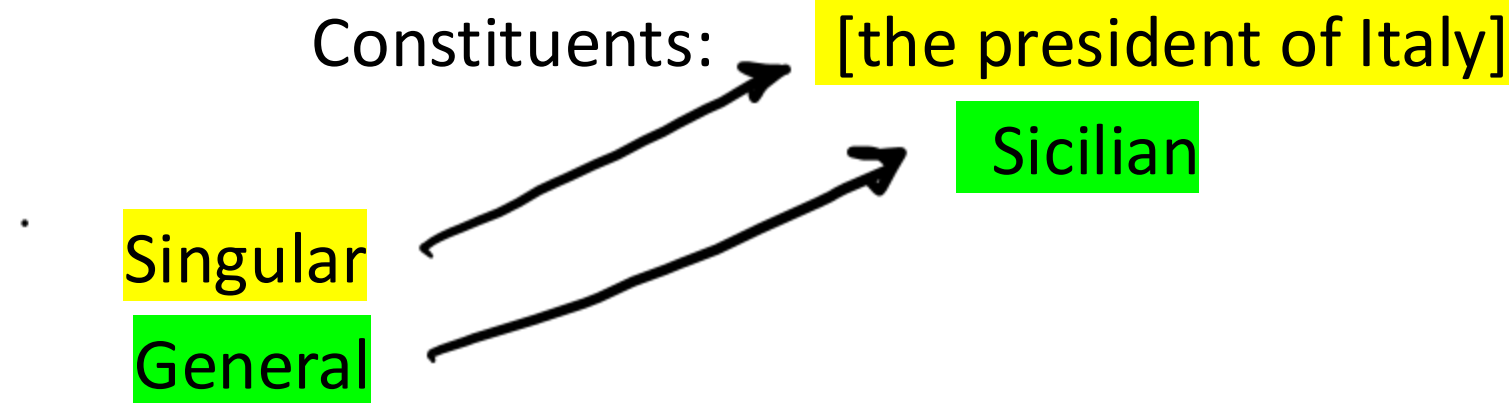
What is a story?

According to story S

- A story is a proposition, typically a complex conjunctive proposition made up of many conjuncts
- There is a *paratextual* relation that links a proposition to a story and that we express with locutions such as “according to the story, ...,” “in the story, ...,” “it is the case, or true, in the story that ...,” and the like.
- A proposition P is linked by this relation to a story S , when either (i) S explicitly asserts P , e.g., P is one of the conjuncts that make up S , or (ii) P can be inferred from S plus all the background assumptions of both a conceptual and encyclopaedic nature
- $in(S, P)$, if, and only if, $(B \ \& \ S)$ entails P , where B is the conjunction of all the appropriate background assumptions.

meanings of singular terms as constituents of propositions

- Definite denoting concepts as meanings of singular terms
- "London is big" ---> [the London](big)
- "the president of Italy is Sicilian" ---> [the president of Italy](Sicilian)



Story vs. chronicle (report)

- text of a story vs. text of a report
- The meaning is a complex proposition in both cases and we have singular and general constituents in both cases
- the attitude of the author is different: asserting vs. pretending/imagining
- Ideally, the report is true and all singular constituents refer to real objects
- Typically, the story is false, although in principle it could be true

True parts of a story

- However, part of the story is typically true and thus some of its singular constituents **refer to real objects**.
- **Semantically, this is the most economic view:** a singular term has the same meaning in a story text and in a report text, and accordingly determines the same referent
- History book: "Napoleon is a great general"
- [the Napoleon](great-general)
- War & Peace: "Napoleon is a great general"



How can a fictum and a real
object be characters of a story

singular constituents of a story

- *A Study in Scarlet* ---> / "SH knows chemistry" "London is foggy"
... "the best friend of Watson is a detective" .../
- Story *S/S* ---> P1 & P2 & ... [the SH](knows_chemistry) & ... & [the London](foggy) & ... & [the best friend of Watson](detective) &
- Singular constituents of *S/S*: ... [the SH], ... [the London], [the best friend of Watson], ...

fictional character of the story

- Singular constituents in SIS: [the detective called Sherlock Holmes], e.g., [the best friend of Watson], [the detective who lives in 221B Baker Street in London], ...
- in(SIS, [the **detective** & Sherlock Holmes & ... & **very clever** & best friend of Watson & ... **lives** in 221B Baker Street **in London** & ...](exist))
- Thick character recapitulates all that is said in the story
- Thin character preserves only the salient features from the story: [the **detective** & **very clever** & **lives in London**]
- **Fictional character of a story**: singular constituent of the story involving all the salient features. Intuitively, the definite description that we could provide as an answer to the question "*Who is Sherlock Holmes in SIS?*"

Real objects as characters of a story

- the author's use of a singular term that in everyday use refers to a real object can establish a significant connection to previous uses of this term; a connection that makes it the case that the real object at issue becomes a character of the story.
- We know that the name "London" refers to London, a certain city, a real entity, the real London, we may say.
- As *that name* occurs in *SIS*, we presumably assume by default that even then the name refers to that very city, which can then be considered a character of *SIS*, albeit not a fictional character.
- This is substantiated by the fact that we know that Doyle knew that "London" referred to London and presumably intended to use *that name* precisely to refer to London and think of it as the place where the characters that he invented live and act.
- In sum, [the London] is a singular constituent of *SIS* since "London" occurs in the text of *SIS*, just as it is a singular constituents of many reports
- In all cases, [the London] refers to London

Real character vs. fictional character of a story

- "Sherlock Holmes"



"London"



- / ...[the **detective** & **very clever** & **lives in London**] [the London] .../

- Primary presence



- Secondary presence



Have the cake and eat it to

Fictional counterparts of real objects

- We could say that this secondary presence of a real object in a story precludes the generation of a *fictum*.
- But we could also think that the alternative intuition should not be ruled out, and that the story also generates a *fictum*, namely a certain salient denoting concept, which we may call a *historical fictum*.
- If so, for example, “**the London of SIS**” is **ambiguous**, as it may have either a *historical* or a *fictional* interpretation.
 - With the former, it denotes the real London
 - with the latter, it denotes a *fictum*, say [the London & SL1 & ... & SLn]; SL1 & ... & SLn is a conjunction of salient features that can be extracted from SIS.

No proliferation of entities, given Platonism

- In a Platonist perspective, there are all these things:
- The story SIS
- the singular constituents [the **detective** & **very clever** & **lives in London**], [the London], [the London & SL1 & ... & SLn]
- Moreover, there is the real London
- the issue is: should we say that [the London & SL1 & ... & SLn] is not a character of SIS just because there is the real London that already is a character of SIS?
- If we admit that [the London & SL1 & ... & SLn] is a character of SIS, we are not really introducing a new entity, we are only granting its status as fictional character

Conclusion

- More details on my approach in:
- **Fictional Characters as Story-Free Denoting Concepts**
Humanities **2025**, 14(6), 112; <https://doi.org/10.3390/h14060112>
<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/14/6/112>
- Thank you for your attention!