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3. “He Doesn’t Look Like Sherlock Holmes”

The Truth Value and Existential Status of Fictional Worlds and their Characters

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**Abstract**

This chapter seeks to define the existential status and truth-value of fictional characters, with frequent appeals to multiple iterations of Sherlock Holmes as an example. It surveys two rival schools of thought, drawn from metaphysics and possible-world semantics. Alexius Meinong’s “non-existent objects”, i.e. the metaphysical approach, is shown to be qualitatively different from how we think of fictional characters. David Lewis’s “truth in fiction”, derived from counterfactual logic and possible-world semantics, fails to address the particularities of fictional characters as they are represented anew across multiple iterations. By contrast, I advance that fictional characters are best thought of as “quasi-existent”—a stipulated term that conveys how their imagined existence is neither reducible to real-world knowledge nor is the sum of their textual iterations. In conclusion, I suggest how “quasi-existent/existence”, however counterintuitive, may prove productive to future theories of fiction.

**Keywords:** Sherlock Holmes, nonexistent objects, truth in fiction, Meinong, David Lewis

**Introduction**

In an interview some years ago, Steven Moffat, co-creator of the BBC series *Sherlock*, declared the following: “I think Robert Downey Jr.’s done a great job of being Sherlock Holmes, but I’m never, ever going to look at him and
believe he actually is Sherlock Holmes. He’s too little, and he doesn’t look like him” (Leader 2010). It is a response any fan, author, or even general audience member understands. We ascribe attributes to fictional entities and thereafter imagine them as looking and acting in a certain way. Conversely, we establish boundaries and limitations within which we accept a range of varied portrayals. Sherlock Holmes, unlike you or me, can exist in the 21st century, or in Victorian England.1

But, in accepting these multiple portrayals, is there any sense in which we think of them as true, or relatively correct? The very idea of a truthful or correct portrayal of Sherlock Holmes seems oxymoronic. Yet the above quote indicates that the truth value of fictional discourse invites greater complexity than the simple declaration that “it’s all made up.” If that is the case, then questions as to the identity of a fictional character—just who is Sherlock Homes?—cannot be explained just in terms of his having originated within the mind of any single individual or collective authorship.

Such concerns have already been taken up in metaphysics, possible-world semantics, and theories of fiction.2 However, understanding fictional worlds as possible worlds leaves unanswered the question of what Murray Smith has termed “the saliency of character”.3 Namely: we think of fictional narratives as being about fictional characters. The latter, in turn, become the focus of our attention. It is, more often than not, characters that sustain our interest and orient our experience of fictional worlds. The problem of character construction, and specifically the truth value and existential status of fictional characters, deserves to be treated as a unique problem. The question now becomes: by what unique terms or even theories might one characterize fictional characters, in relation to truth, existence, and/or fictitious worlds? Hopefully, in answering this question, we might tease out the hidden wisdom (or obfuscation) as to what is meant when we say an actor does or does not look like Sherlock Holmes.

There are at least two philosophical answers to this: the first arises from metaphysics; the second, from possible-world semantics. The metaphysical answer is that Sherlock Holmes and, by implication, all fictional characters, are “nonexistent objects”: entities that do no exist, but retain nominal and even abstract identities all the same.4 The answer from possible-world semantics is that fictional characters are a corollary to imagined worlds. Fictional characters are identified as part of fictional worlds, beyond which there is no theoretical need to confer upon them a unique identity (i.e. “nonexistent” or otherwise). Possible-world semantics rejects the metaphysical account, on grounds of intellectual parsimony.
Consequently, I will argue against both accounts. In turn, I advance that fictional characters hold unique identities. These identities are best thought of as “quasi-existent”.

In what follows, I first consider the theory of nonexistent objects as inadequate to accounts of fictional characters. I thereafter turn to theories of possible worlds and counterfactual logic, only to find them lacking. This, therefore, leads me to the quasi-existence of fictional characters, which I defend as argumentatively necessary.

**Meinong: Objects Nonexistent and Quasi-existent**

Alexius Meinong’s 1904 essay “The Theory of Objects” attempts nothing short of arguing for the viability of a philosophical discipline, developing its titular theory within metaphysics. This theory advances the counterintuitive notion that there can be nonexistent objects: e.g. round squares and golden mountains. This position derives from the principle of beyond being, or Aussersein, which, as Meinong contends, arises from the independence of essence from existence, or Sosein from Sein: “that which is not in any way external to the Object, but constitutes its proper essence, subsists in its Sosein—the Sosein attaching to the Object whether the object has being or not” (Meinong 1960, 86). To this, Meinong adds:

> Being is not the presupposition under which knowledge finds, as it were, its point of attack; it is itself such a point of attack. Non-being is equally as good a point of attack. Furthermore, in the Sosein of each Object, knowledge already finds a field of activity to which it may have access without first answering the question concerning being or non-being, or without answering this question affirmatively. (ibid.)

Aussersein in turn serves as a substitute for an earlier concept, Quasisein, or quasi-being, which Meinong abandoned: “Can being which is in principle unopposed by non-being be called being at all?” (1960, 85). Without entering into the theoretical validity of aussersein, I argue that Meinong was premature in jettisoning quasi-being, or preferably quasi-existence, as it enjoys a special relevance to fictional representations. This entails that the characters populating cinematic and other fictions are ultimately of a different type from the logically impossible objects for which Meinong developed his theory of nonexistent objects. I consider why his argument against the logical valence of quasi-being is illegitimate; subsequently,
I indicate why nonexistence cannot be applied to the likes of Sherlock Holmes or Dracula.

The argument that quasi-being can neither be posited as a polar opposite to being or non-being is fallible. It approximates Aristotle’s law of the excluded middle, albeit inaccurately: one must affirm or deny something, but cannot half-affirm and/or half-deny it. One must either affirm or deny that Sherlock Holmes is a nonexistent object. Nonetheless, denying that Holmes is a nonexistent object does not commit one to the view that Sherlock Holmes exists: one alternatively might say he subsists.7 Likewise, when running your finger in some water, you must either affirm or deny that it is cold: denying that it is cold might entail that the water is warm, a temperature that is, in essence, quasi-hot and quasi-cold. Two terms may be antithetical, but this hardly negates intermediary concepts or properties.

More importantly, one cannot conceive of zombies and vampires in the same way one thinks of Meinong’s round square and golden mountain. Consider how one Meinong scholar describes these entities:

we make concepts, descriptions, imaginary representations, and so on, that apply or fail to apply to objects, but none of these things we make are the objects themselves. When we imagine a particular object, we are not making it but picking it out of the infinite abundance of *Aussersein* and focusing our attention on it rather than on some other object. (Perszyk 1993, 257-258).

Are we imagining a round square, an exemplar of this impossible object, or any round square that might correspond to this linguistic utterance (i.e. “round square” as a word)? Putting the matter technically, do our thoughts correspond to attitudes that are *de dicto* (i.e. about what is said) or *de re* (i.e. about the thing)?8 For Perszyk, they cannot be *de dicto*:

In imagining a golden mountain, one is surely imagining that something is golden and a mountain, and in imagining a round square, one is surely imagining that something is both round and square, at least if this is understood *de dicto*. But if it is understood *de dicto*, it is contentious to say that there is a nonexistent object of the imagining. In *de dicto* attitudes, there need be no object at all, existent or nonexistent, as Russell showed. (258-259)

Turning to the other side of the equation, consider again Perszyk: “Now, if this is not *de dicto*, but *de re*, the claim that if someone thinks of a golden mountain, it can *at best* be something that is thought or imagined to be
golden and a mountain [...] is surely mistaken; it is golden and a mountain, if this is de re.” (259). We therefore return to the paradox of beingless objects—that in Meinong's metaphysics, a round square is an object of sorts, albeit not one which exists, and that we cannot therefore individuate it within any referential capacity.

While round squares and golden mountains cannot be the object of de re attitudes, zombies, vampires, Sherlock Holmes, and other fictional characters can. For example, when we speak of James Bond, we usually mean Ian Fleming’s creation. We do not mean the real-life ornithologist from whom Fleming derived the name of his secret agent. Hence, our attitude to James Bond is de re: we refer to Fleming’s Bond, and not the ornithologist (or vice versa). By contrast, there is no referring the round square, insofar as it is invoked by Meinong, to some alternate namesake. To do so would entail that the round square has varied instantiations, which defeats the very premise that it is nonexistent.

This brings us to the second way fictional characters are not like a round square. Consider the character Dracula, as originated by Bram Stoker. He is more than just an undead individual of protean shape and form who thrives on human blood. In an alternate universe in which there had never been any mention of vampires—by which I mean not just that there were no vampire tales, but that the very term and the concept it implies had not been thought of—“bloodsucking undead individual” would be an eligible candidate for beingless objecthood, alongside round squares, golden mountains, etc. When an ostensibly imaginary object appears within a culturally sanctified representational context, it achieves a different status from “beingless object.” The degree to which “round square” or “golden mountain” are enshrined within philosophical discourses moves these two terms closer into the orbit of Fleming’s or Stoker’s respective creations. Nonetheless, they exemplify an argument, but they are unlikely to operate within a constructed (fictional) universe. On the contrary, we are not meant to imagine the existence of a round square, for example, but to believe in its nonexistence. Conversely, Hamlet makes for a rather ineffective tragedy if one reads it as a tract on the nonexistence of a neurasthenic prince. But this raises the question as to the truth value of fictional discourse and the existential status of its characters.

David Lewis and Counterfactuals

We must now turn to David Lewis, who is worth citing at length on the topic of the truth value of fictional discourse:
Reasoning about truth in fiction is very much like counterfactual reasoning. We make a supposition contrary to fact [...]. But we do not use factual premises altogether freely, since some of them would fall victim to the change that takes us from actuality to the envisaged counterfactual situation. [...] We depart from actuality as far as we must to reach a possible world where the counterfactual supposition comes true (and that might be quite far if the supposition is a fantastic one). (Lewis 1983, 269)

Furthermore, Lewis dismisses the Meinongian approach as unduly complicated. Instead of theorizing about nonexistent objects within the context of fictional narratives, he proposes the concept of “inter-fictional carry-over” (274). By this he means that whatever knowledge one acquires about Sherlock Holmes in an individual story (e.g. he is a brilliant detective, suffers from depression, plays the violin, etc.) then applies to all other fictional iterations of Doyle's creation. Without such a principle, most stories would pose serious challenges to our comprehension:

I have spoken of Conan Doyle's Holmes stories; but many other authors also have written Holmes story. [...] Surely many things are true in these satellite stories [...] because they carry over from Conan Doyle’s original Holmes stories. Similarly, if instead of asking what is true in the entire corpus of Conan Doyle's Holmes stories we ask what is true in “The Hound of the Baskervilles,” we will doubtless find many things that are true in that story only by virtue of carry-over from Conan Doyle's other Holmes stories. (ibid.).

Inter-fictional carry-over is useful and ingenious, but it need not stamp out quasi-existence, nor does it address all the thorny issues that quasi-existence ably encompasses.

Let us see in greater detail the logic of counterfactual reasoning, and how it relates to fiction. In either case, while the antecedent may be imagined, at least some of the preconditions for the antecedent ought to have some real-world basis (i.e. in our existing world). A question such as, “Would Shakespeare turn to filmmaking were he alive today?” invites some logical incertitude. To imagine Shakespeare in the picture business today, we would have to suppose a man born in the sixteenth century alive and well in the 21st—either with the assistance of a time machine or the fountain of youth. Arguably: the consideration that within an alternate history Shakespeare might have been born four centuries later is not so easily amenable to the problem at hand. The reasoning here is that William Shakespeare,
the flesh and blood human being responsible for having written several plays and sonnets, was who he was in part because of his genetic/DNA makeup, inherited from his parents. At least within a real-world context, I defer to Saul Kripke on this point. To suppose otherwise would constitute what Lewis has otherwise termed an “impossible antecedent”, meaning a hypothetical reality that “differ[s] from our world in matters of philosophical, mathematical and even logical truth” (1973, 24).

This raises troubling prospects for a broad range of theories on counterfactual reasoning, although the difficulty may be plausibly circumvented. Take Willard V.O. Quine’s famous speculation on how Caesar might have fought if alive during the Korean War. As Marc Lange points out, to suggest that this would be the same Caesar who was a Roman Emperor, and thus must be endowed with immortality, verges on the superfluous: the interest of the counterfactual involves Caesar’s skills as a military tactician, not some hypothetical defiance of mortality. Lange further indicates that the antecedent “If Caesar had fought in Korea” may be “consistent with [natural] law” (1993, 263), despite his commitment to what he has dubbed nomic preservation: that counterfactual reasoning in logic is bound to the laws of nature. If one accepts this, the question remains: How to characterize the representation of Caesar in each and every one of these statements? In turn, if one rejects nomic preservation, as David Lewis does, one must still explain by what logic Caesar is relocated to Korea, circa 1950. No less remarkably, John Halpin invokes the possibility of miracles. By contrast, I offer a simpler account as to how one might entertain the speculation of Caesar fighting in Korea.

Evidently, in the above case, something of the flesh and blood human being of history, Julius Caesar’s biological personhood, is lost. Conversely, as Lange implies, a set of personal characteristics has been abstracted from this biological person and arraigned under a differently defined historical or cultural persona. This is akin to Charles S. Peirce’s precise abstraction. Even if one rejects the latter two declarations, it seems absurd to wonder whether the Caesar in some alternate world who fought in Korea is still the Caesar of our world, albeit born of different parents. Lewis might here invoke his similarity of counterparts theory: Caesar in Korea is a similar counterpart to our Caesar, but not the same man. Without dismissing this stipulation altogether, I draw attention to the fact that our belief in the literal existence of other worlds is premised on Lewis’s insistence, which invites further argumentative quandaries. Returning to our imaginary world where Caesar fought in Korea, we need to envisage the latter as benefiting from some modified version of either subsistence or existence, akin to what happens with the creation of fictional characters.
Lewis contends that what we believe to be true in the world is taken to be true in fiction, unless specified otherwise. Nonetheless, a necessary condition for one’s individual personhood, call it hereditary dependency, does not carry over into fiction, and it is never specified otherwise. In the BBC series Sherlock, the world of the titular detective has been updated so that he lives, not in Victorian England, but in the London of today. Yet, the show’s co-creators do not speak of displacing Holmes’s entire family lineage roughly a century ahead—despite the fact that his brother Mycroft figures in the series. Rather, it is understood that Sherlock Holmes and his surrounding dramatis personae (Watson, Mrs. Hudson, Mycroft, Moriarty, Lestrade, Irene Adler, etc.) have simply been modernized—regardless of whom their imaginary parents might or might not have been.

The chromosomal makeup of fictional characters is equally far removed from their imagined identities, so they can switch gender from fiction to fiction. The most famous case in film history may be when Howard Hawks reimagined Hilary Johnson from The Front Page as a woman (cf. His Girl Friday, 1940). Recent examples, again in Sherlock Holmes, provide even more radical iterations. The TV series Elementary turns John Watson into Joan Watson and, in one spectacular plot twist, recasts Moriarty as a woman who adopts the (diegetically fake) persona of Irene Adler. The counterfactual “what ifs?” guiding this storytelling reinforce the crucial point that characters do not benefit from any genetic/chromosomal stability but still remain who they are as fictional constructs. Narratives of Dracula and Superman often undermine this aforementioned stability even more greatly. Red Son, a comic book later adapted into film, conceives of Superman not as the son of Jor-El, hailing from the planet Krypton, but as a descendant of Lex Luthor, sent into the past in a time-travelling capsule from planet Earth. Wes Craven’s Dracula 2000 posits that its lead vampire is no longer Vlad Tepes, but Judas: here we have a case of Stoker’s vampire transformed from a different historical figure. In both cases—Superman and Dracula—the characters remain who they are meaning that Superman is still understood to be Superman and Dracula is still Dracula, even if they are no longer genetically who they are. Consequently, just who they are, and how to speak of this, becomes a capital question.

Quasi-Existence

To reiterate, and to state the obvious: fictional characters do not literally exist. More importantly, even as imaginary constructs, they lack crucial,
defining properties of existing objects. Chief among these is what I have termed hereditary dependence: that one must inevitably take into account her genetic/DNA constitution in individuating human beings. The same does not apply to fictional characters. We at least tacitly assume that they do possess some genetic/DNA constitution. This (presumed, imagined) constitution, however, may change from one textual iteration to another. All the same, Sherlock Holmes is still Sherlock Holmes, whether he is alive today or over a century ago. We tacitly accept these inconsistencies in his (imagined) biological and historical personhood. We equally and habitually do so without stipulating additional interpretive assumptions (e.g. if Sherlock Holmes is living today, and not in the Victorian era, then that means his family lineage must have been equally displaced by over a century).

For these reasons, fictional characters are more than the sum of their properties as evoked in fictional worlds. If this statement holds, accounts of fictional character-hood limited to “truth in fiction” and/or possible worlds are insufficient. Indeed, “truth in fiction” merely states that one knows the properties or distinguishing features of a character on the basis of an initial fictional context. One thereafter applies this knowledge in further contexts. For example, one knows who Sherlock Holmes is in his second literary appearance, The Sign of Four, on the basis of how he has been portrayed in his inaugural literary appearance in A Study in Scarlet. This is then expanded in possible-world semantics. From Doyle’s Sherlock to the BBC version, one simply has counterfactual alternatives of the same character. In other words, “What if there was a great detective living in London circa 1887?” is replaced by “What if there was a great detective living in London today?” One has stipulated alternate worlds and Sherlock Holmes is simply part and parcel—albeit a central part—of this world.

But, as should be clear, the above proves inadequate. Despite factors such as hereditary dependence, Sherlock Holmes always remains Sherlock Holmes, above and beyond the defining specifications of his imagined world (i.e. his imagined, familial provenance). If this seems like, at best, a trifle inconvenient to counterfactual logic and interpretive theory, then consider the range of counterexamples: e.g. characters who explicitly change parents; gender; personhood; even, in at least one adaptation of a Holmes tale, names. They retain a continuous identity across such inconsistencies. Furthermore, this continuous identity and these inconsistencies are never accounted for within the imagined reality of their respective worlds, or the “truth” of their fictitious depictions. Any way one tackles the problem, fictional characters are not reducible to their collective textual iterations and/or their collective imagined worlds. Their aforementioned continuity
and inconsistencies are accounted for in terms of another unifying principle, which I term quasi-existence.

By quasi-existence, I mean that, within their fictional contexts, characters benefit from many, but not all, of the defining characteristics of actual human beings. Unless specified otherwise, they share many of the features of what Murray Smith has termed the “person schema”. As such, characters possess physical bodies and consciousness, as well as intentions, affects, and personalities. They additionally, as with real people, have ongoing personal histories: e.g. we know that Sherlock Holmes has faked his death.

At the same time, even within their fictional contexts, they lack crucial defining characteristics of actual human beings. Hence, at any one time, at least a few of their defining characteristics can be subject to significant variation, if not incommensurable change. These pivotal changes do not necessarily undermine the character’s fictitious identity. What emerges instead is a composite portrait, which encompasses irreconcilable discrepancies, and which surpasses the truth-claims of their fictitious worlds. They are neither existent in the real world (i.e. as people), nor only existent within the delimitations of their fictional contexts (i.e. true by virtue of their inter-fictional carry-over). Rather, they occupy a middle-position that is best designated as quasi-existent.

Conclusion

To summarize, in terms of their imaginary or fictitious existence, fictional characters have been approached in two ways. Firstly, they have been equated with nonexistent objects, a concept derived from the metaphysics of Alexius Meinong. Secondly, they have been posited as corollaries to imagined worlds. Therefore, whatever is true within the evoked world is true of its characters. I have sought to show that neither account is fully satisfying. In terms of how they are individuated, fictional characters cannot be equated with Meinong’s nonexistent objects. Minimally, fictional characters subsist within a diegetic universe. They can be the object of reference, whereas nonexistent objects as invoked by Meinong cannot. This leads to David Lewis’s rival account of “truth in fiction”.

However, the epistemic conditions according to which characters are identified are not entirely given in their evoked worlds. For example, Superman is still Superman, even when he is revealed to be an Earthling and not a Kryptonian. Likewise, Sherlockians watching His Last Vow understand that “Charles Augustus Magnussen” is really “Charles Augustus Milverton” (from
Doyle’s “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton”) despite the change of name.¹ This means that fictional characters derive their continuous identities from more than how they are evoked in possible worlds. Quasi-existence therefore designates characters’ imagined existence, above and beyond their multiple appearances and the irreconcilable discrepancies, from one appearance to the next. The term may seem counterintuitive; however, it remains the least unlikely characterization when juxtaposed with the other accounts developed so far.

Conversely, if we can accept quasi-existence as a meaningful concept, then it concisely conveys the existential status of fictional beings. We understand that quasi-existent entities are endowed with several real-life attributes, but may also lack certain defining properties, even within an imagined context. We also understand that quasi-existent beings are more than the sum of their textual iterations and achieve continuity of identity independently of their attendant worlds. Finally, and more importantly, we equally understand that real-life individuals can approach quasi-existent status, when evoked within a make-believe context. Hence, to return to the Caesar-in-Korea thought experiment: Caesar becomes a quasi-existent entity, not unlike a fictional character. Consequently, historical fictions would be seen as constructing characters no less distinct from reality than fictitious individuals who have been invented whole cloth. If so, then the breadth and scope of what is understood by “world” within theories of fiction might intrude much more on our real world²⁰ than we might have previously imagined.

Notes

1. I take it as an acceptable generalization that we think of the multiple versions of Sherlock Holmes as all representing the “same” Sherlock Holmes. Meaning: these are alternate versions of one identical fictional character. Exceptions may include when a single narrative or work explicitly flags that there are multiple worlds and versions of what would seem to be the same character (e.g. Sherlock: The Abominable Bride). This hinges on the distinction between what may be termed transworld identity and similarity of counterparts (see, in Lewis: 1973, 36-43; 1983, 266-267; and 1986, 192-220). Roughly speaking, Lewis argues for transworld identity within fictional worlds and for counterpart similarity within (non-fictional) possible worlds. I briefly return to this topic further on.

2. For metaphysics, see: Parsons 1980. For possible world semantics, see: Lewis 1983. For theories of fiction, see: Ryan 1991.

The argument for nonexistent objects is attributed to Alexius Meinong. Meinong was not specifically concerned with theories of fiction. However, subsequent Meinongian scholars have applied his metaphysics to theories of fiction: see Parsons 1980, 49-60 and 175-211; see also Pasniczek 2001. I do not comment directly on these efforts, but indicate instead that fictional characters may be categorically different from nonexistent objects, as invoked by Meinong. If this is so, then it should undermine the prospects for a Meinongian theory of fiction. At the very least, apparent non-sequiturs in methodology would have to be met.

In so doing, I also cast my lot with ideal language philosophy. Namely: ordinary language cannot sufficiently account for our experience of the world, such that one must stipulate internally coherent and logically consistent terms. It is my hope that “quasi-existence” will fit the bill as per the existential status of fictional characters.

Meinong’s work was met with vociferous objections, chiefly from Bertrand Russell (see: Russell 1973, 21-93). In the many years since, Meinong has enjoyed a reappraisal. See, for example: Jacquette 2015, Perszyk 1993, and the essays collected in Griffin and Jacquette 2009. I merely argue that nonexistent objects and fictional characters are ultimately incommensurable entities. I leave aside the intrinsic value of Meinong’s original theory.

Typically, concrete objects exist, while abstract universals subsist. See: Russell 1997, 100. Likewise, according to one theorist, “Sherlock Holmes” [taken as rigid designator] refers to an abstract object that actually exists” (Contessa 2009, 263). By “rigid designator”, one means, as a name, “Sherlock Holmes” refers to one thing, and one thing only (i.e. Doyle’s fictional detective). This addresses the problem backwards, however, insofar that the same fictional character can change names from one textual iteration to the next: e.g. Charles Augustus Milverton, in an original story by Conan Doyle (“The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton”), becomes Charles August Magnussen in Sherlock: His Last Vow. I return to this problem later in the chapter.

“I want to see a Steve McQueen film” may be interpreted differently. For de dicto, there would be no discrimination between the nominal actor and director: any film with the name in and of itself (i.e. of what is said) suffices. De re presupposes the opposite: either the actor or the director (i.e. of the thing: that whom the name denotes). This is an absurd example, devised for the sake of simplicity. More sophisticated distinctions along these lines have been made.

Kripke, 1980, 113. In other respects, my inquiry differs from his: see his theory of fiction (Kripke, 2013, 55-78), which resembles Contessa 2009.

The thought experiment is originally attributed to Quine, though I am unaware as to whether he ever published it. David Lewis makes mention of it without citation (1973, 66-67).

In fact, while the term is visibly Lange’s, his understanding of nomic preservation is but one possible variant, for which he is criticized (Demarest 2012). See also: Lange 2009. I eschew such specification in the present context.
14. See: Lewis 1986. For a sympathetic account of Lewis's modal realism, see: Bricker 2006. For a critique, see Chihana 1998, 76-103. I cannot enter the debate here. Instead, I signal my agreement with Kripke that possible worlds are imagined entities of our devising, that need not command literal belief. See especially: Kripke 1980, 15-20 and 43-44.
15. This is elsewhere phrased as the “principle of minimal departure”. See: Ryan 1991, 48-60.
16. It may not even be clear to what extent fictional characters have (imagined) essential properties. One can imagine a retelling of Sherlock Holmes in which he never became a famous detective living at 221B Baker Street, but solely devoted his life to beekeeping, away from London. The implication, which cannot be developed here, is that any seemingly defining aspect of a fictional character may be subject to radical change. A character, via her multiple iterations, would be identifiable more in terms of “family resemblances” than by any shortlist of necessary/sufficient conditions. Conceivably, there must also be a tipping point, beyond which the character ceases to be recognizable as such (i.e. Sherlock Holmes can only withstand so many changes—in profession, in character, even in name—beyond which he is transformed into a categorically different character).
17. See: note 7, above, on Charles Augustus Milverton/Magnussen. Consider, also, the case of “Herlock Sholmes”, a spoof of Doyle’s creation devised by Maurice Leblanc. Imagine a series of “Sholmes” stories that nonetheless recapitulate, blow by blow, the key plot points of Doyle’s original stories. Why wouldn’t this stand as interventions in the Holmes universe, on par with any number of adaptations and spin-offs? Stipulating a necessary and exclusive link between fictional name and identity (i.e. he cannot be Sherlock Holmes unless he is named Sherlock Holmes) would here seem meagre and doctrinaire.
19. See: notes 7 and 17 above.
20. Of course, this presupposes that there is only one actual world, a view challenged most notably by Goodman 1978. I leave the matter aside, although Goodman’s nominalism would not undermine the views set forth here.

Works Cited


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**About the author**

Julien Lapointe is a PhD candidate at Concordia University. He has recently presented his work at the Screen Studies Conference (2014), the Udine International Film Conference (2015), and by invitation at the Université de Montréal. He has written for *Film Quarterly, The Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, and *Mise au Point*. Additionally, he wrote a chapter in *The Legacies of Jean-Luc Godard* (WLU Press, 2014). His doctoral thesis proposes a theory of cinematic representation that defines the relationship between representation, affect, and aesthetics, drawing on analytic philosophy/logic (Frege, Russell), logical positivism (Carnap), and its heirs (Goodman, Chomsky), while also addressing classical film theory (Arnheim, Bazin), the Opojaz (Shklovsky), and recent cognitive film theory and/or theories of affect/emotion. He hopes to pursue a post-doctorate on representations of Sherlock Holmes with a focus on theories of rationality, belief, and world-building.