

Trapped in *The Compartment*: Abstraction and Bias in Narrative



David K. Elson
December 14, 2005

Review of last time

- All stories are formulaic, for sufficiently small formulas.
 - Syntax analogy: does not limit creativity
- Story interpretation works as **pattern recognition** over described actions
 - Particular goals with which to sympathize
 - Characters with particular value systems
 - Situations plausible in our world

Formalist layers of narrative

Text structure:

Description, dialogue, parallelism,
rising/falling action, climax, coda

Narrative semantics:

Heroes, villains, goals, obstacles, plot
arcs, themes, morals

Raw timeline:

Actions, events, characters

Discourse

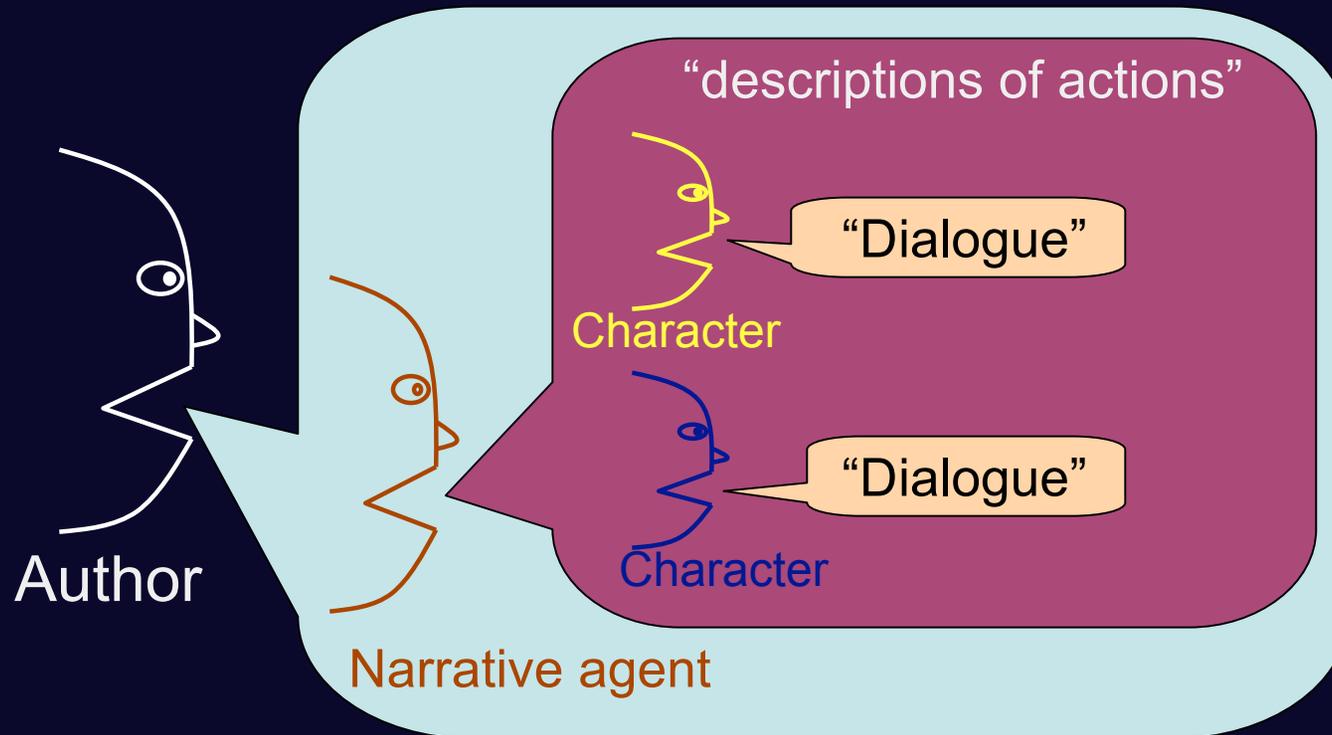
Observed

Implied

Story

Fabula

Nested speakers



Narrative agent works at discourse level

The Plot



1. Pattern Recognition
2. Selection Bias
3. *The Compartment*

The Plot



1. **Pattern Recognition**
2. Selection Bias
3. *The Compartment*

Back to basics

- What is the core method of narrative?
 - A **causal relationship** between events.

Juxtaposition implies causality

- The green light turned on.
- The car began to move.

- I let go of the spoon.
- The spoon fell all by itself.
- Mommy picked up the spoon for me.

- *Jesus Christ Superstar* premiered in August 1973.
- OPEC then punished America with an oil embargo.
 - Post hoc, ergo propter hoc.

Example

- What's wrong with this menu layout for a widget-selling Web page?

FEATURES DOWNLOAD PURCHASE SUPPORT CONTACT

Juxtaposition and Causality in *The Compartment*

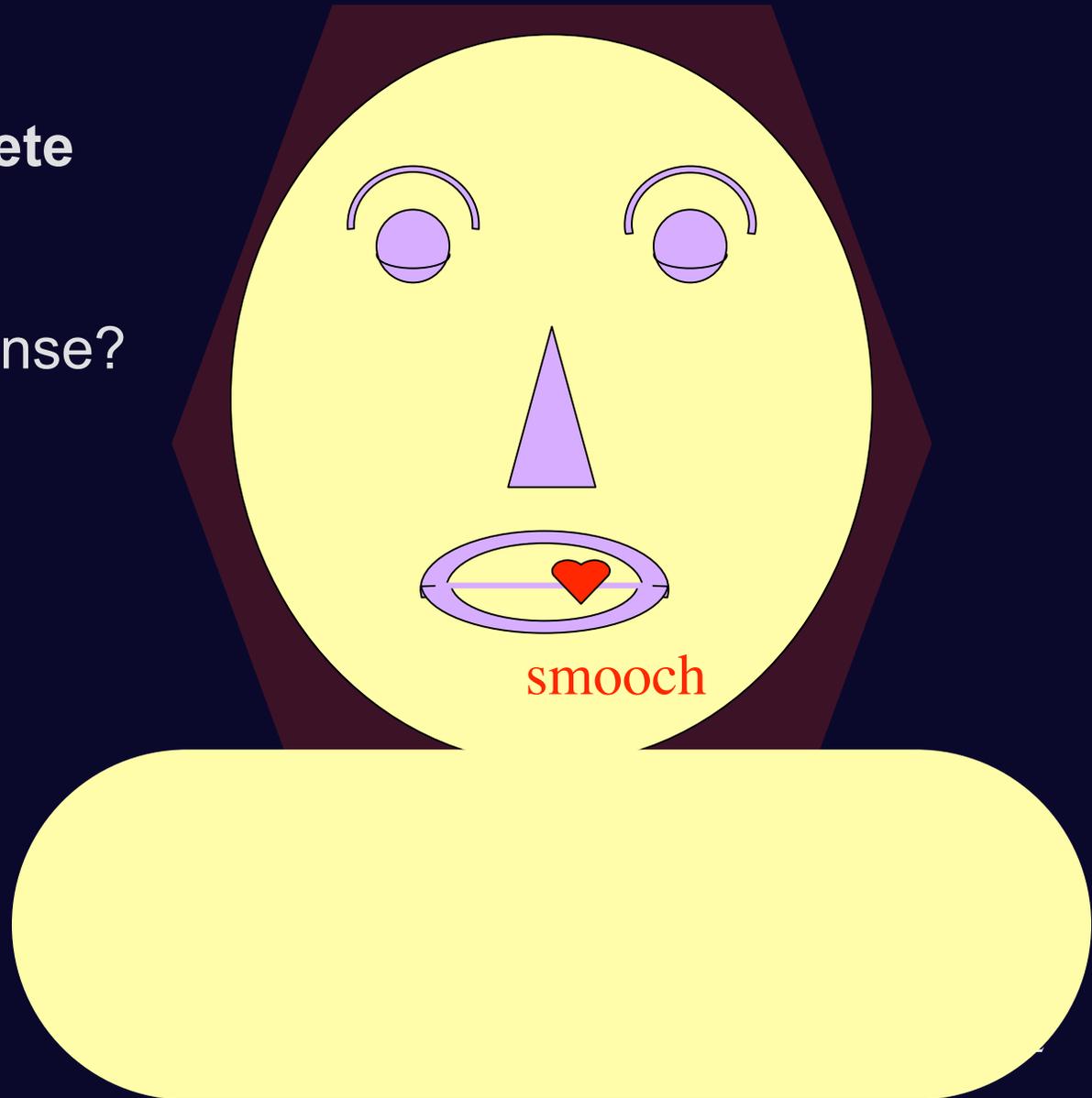
- Myers' expensive gift watch went missing.
- Myers decided he did not really want to see his son, and that the entire trip was a foolish mistake.
- Causal? How?
 - Unexplained, left to interpretation

How do we find causality?

- We have a **model** about the way the world is, and construct **plausible narratives** that best fit the model.
- This is an iterative process of **pattern recognition**.
- Is this circular, given the spoon example?
 - What color is **blue**?

Example

- Can you **complete** the remainder?
- Does it draw an emotional response?



Just some
geometric
shapes!

Where I fit in

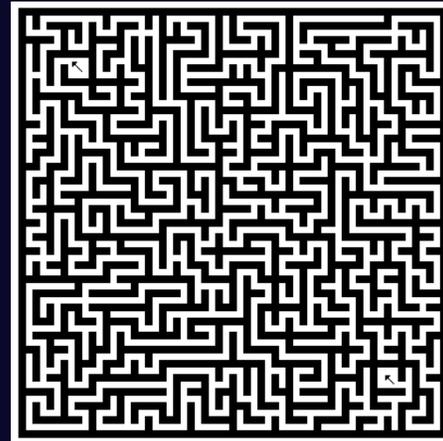
- I am looking at the way this works in narrative with respect to **tellability**:
 - What makes a good story **more** than a sequence of causally related actions?
 - What are the **patterns** of narrative that we match to?
 - Whether in fiction, nonfiction, personal experience, gossip, news, law....

Pattern recognition

- Compare new information against an **expectation model**
 - Associations we've seen, *received ideas*
- Find the most **likely** match and **parse** for understanding
 - Connect new information to previously seen information
- Re-parse if new information causes and earlier parse to be less **likely**

A linguistic example

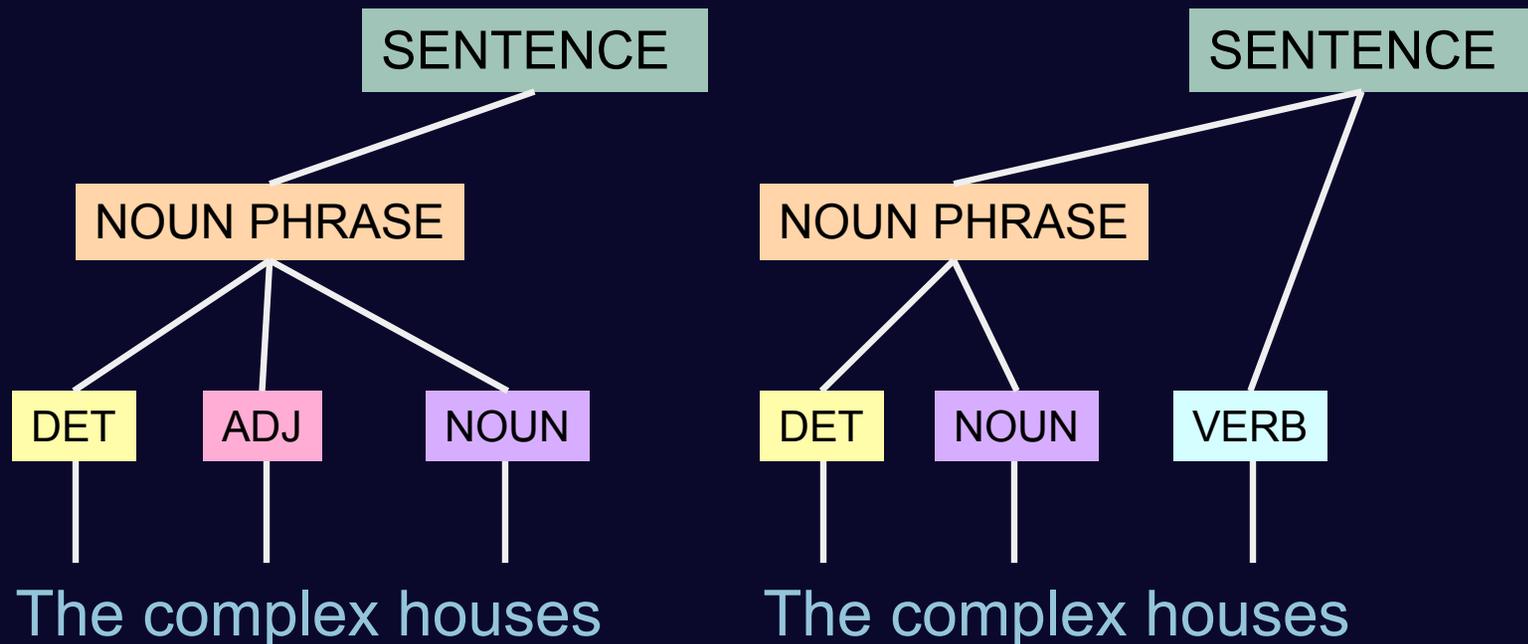
- The
- complex
- houses
- married
- and
- single
- students
- and
- their
- families.



Backtrack
like in a
maze!

Parsing

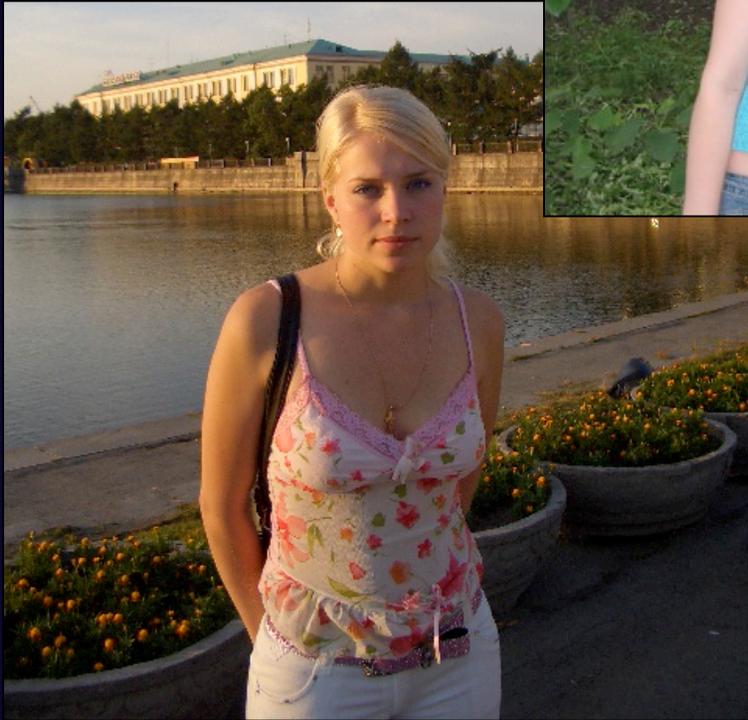
- Parsing means finding the combination of patterns that led to the observed phenomenon, according to a syntax.



Total ambiguity

- Even when all information is known, the parse can still be ambiguous.
 - I saw the man on the hill with the telescope.

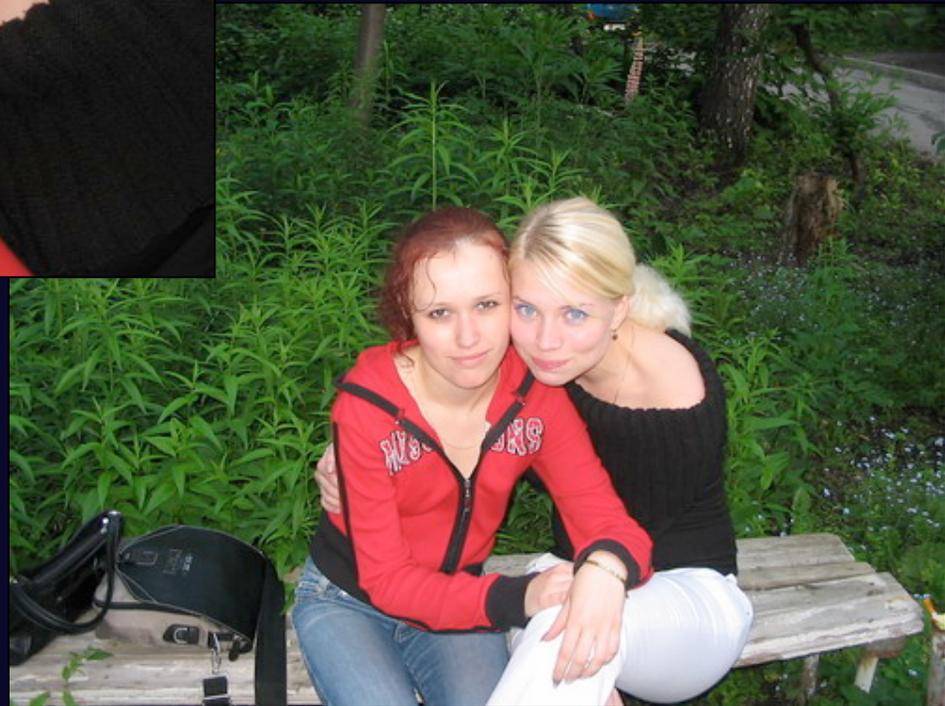
A narrative example



A narrative example



A narrative example



A narrative example



A narrative example



A narrative example

	Фамилия	ЕКИНЕНА	
	Имя	ТАНЯ	
	Отчество	ФЕДОРОВНА	
	Пол	ЖЕН.	Дата рождения 20.12.1979
	Место рождения	ГОР. ТОБОЛЬСК	

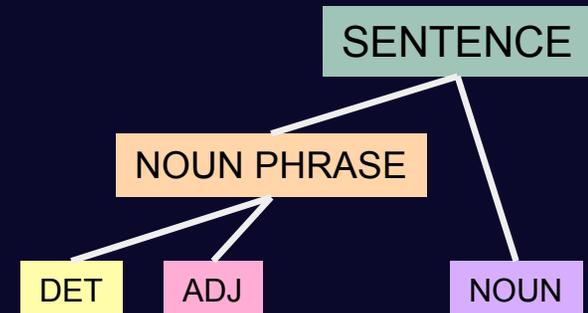
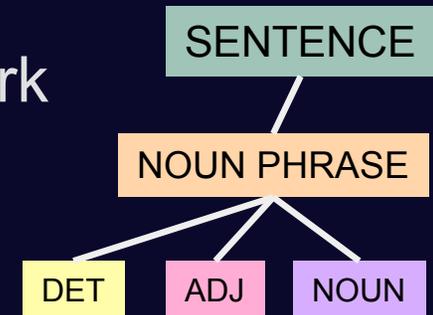


What happened?

- Most plausible narrative applied at each stage
 - Subtly shifting estimation of most probable desire
- Backtracking occurred with new information
 - I reparsed into a **simpler** but wrong solution, even though the simplest was possible all along
 - Now it is a part of our model
- Plausibility ended up trumping narrative agent
 - Search for causality negates **all** assertions!
 - We tossed out **entire** story-world

Applicable Narrative Parses, Before and After

- GOAL: **economic opportunity**
 - PLUS **availability** of work in New York
 - CAUSES **journey** to New York
 - SUBGOAL: find housing
 - SUBGOAL: seduce American host
- GOAL: **cash**
 - PLUS lack of **moral scruples**
 - ENABLES clever **scam**



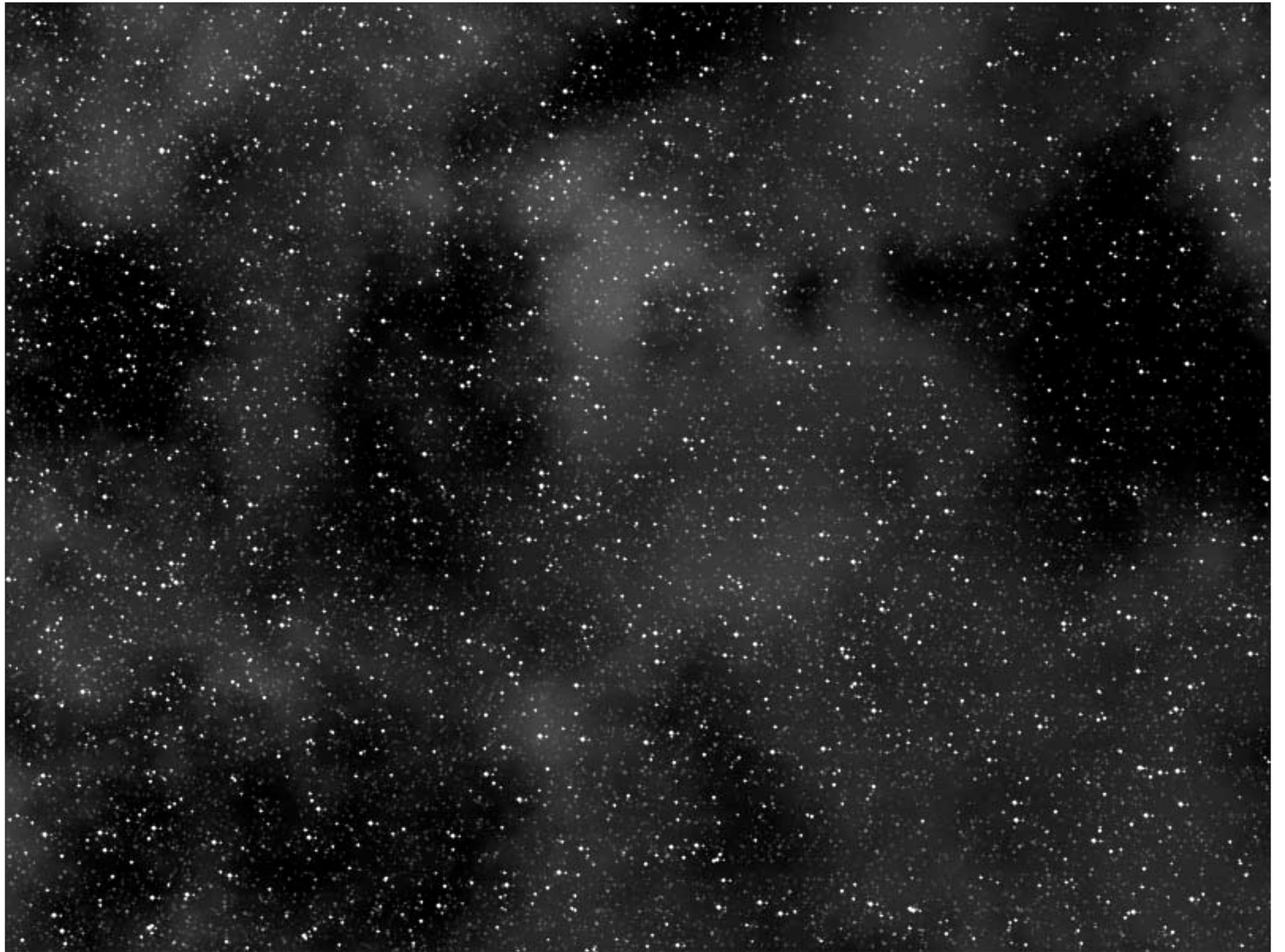
Narrative models

- Everything we see in a narrative clicks in to a pattern we have seen before.
 - If not, we guess its meaning from its juxtaposed pieces
- This happens at micro levels (words and syntax) to macro levels (plots and themes)
 - Cliché from overuse, not use, of large chunks of pattern
- Every assertion is subject to a search for causality (e.g., plausible goals) that affects your trustworthiness.
 - Segue into next section...

The Plot



1. Pattern Recognition
2. **Selection Bias**
3. *The Compartment*



Anthropic principle

- The Universe is the way it is because otherwise we would not be here to ask about it.

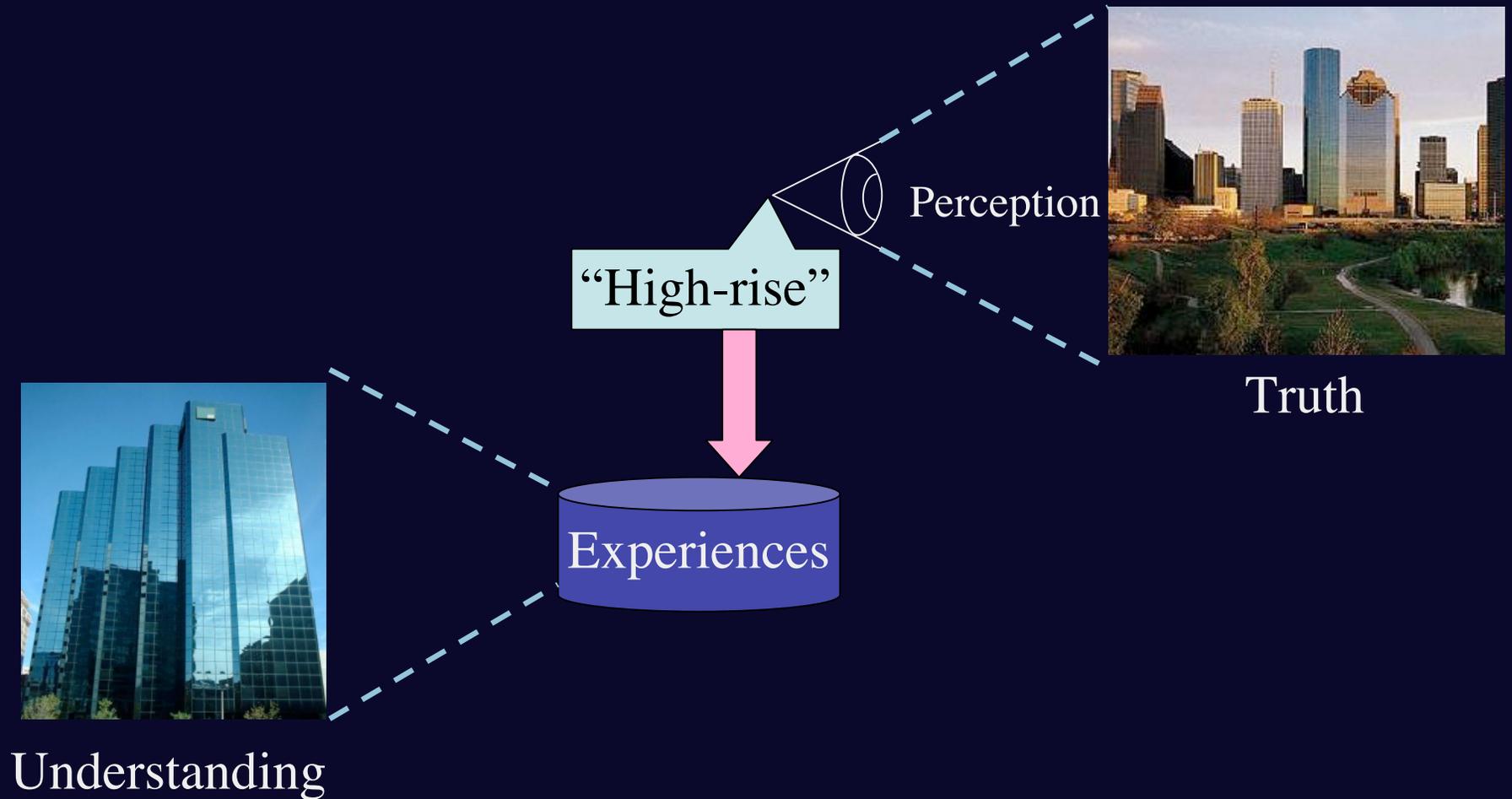
Literary anthropic principle

- The observable story is the way it is because that's the only part we are able to perceive.
 - The story exists only because of the way it is being told.
 - We cannot access these events through another telling.
 - Instead, we have to estimate the complete picture using our expectation model.

Consequences

- To **know** a fact about the story-world is to be **biased** toward its knowing.
 - More important than parts of the story-world left unsaid?
 - A narrator may be omniscient, but she can tell us everything, so she is effectively not omniscient at all.

Abstraction in narrative



The power of the abstracting perceiver

- From a right-wing blog:

You're walking down a deserted street with your wife and two small children. Suddenly, a dangerous looking man with a huge knife comes around the corner, locks eyes with you, screams obscenities, raises the knife, and charges. You are carrying a Glock .40 and you are an expert shot. You have mere seconds before he reaches you and your family. What do you do?

- By the anthropic principle, this is all we can know about the world.

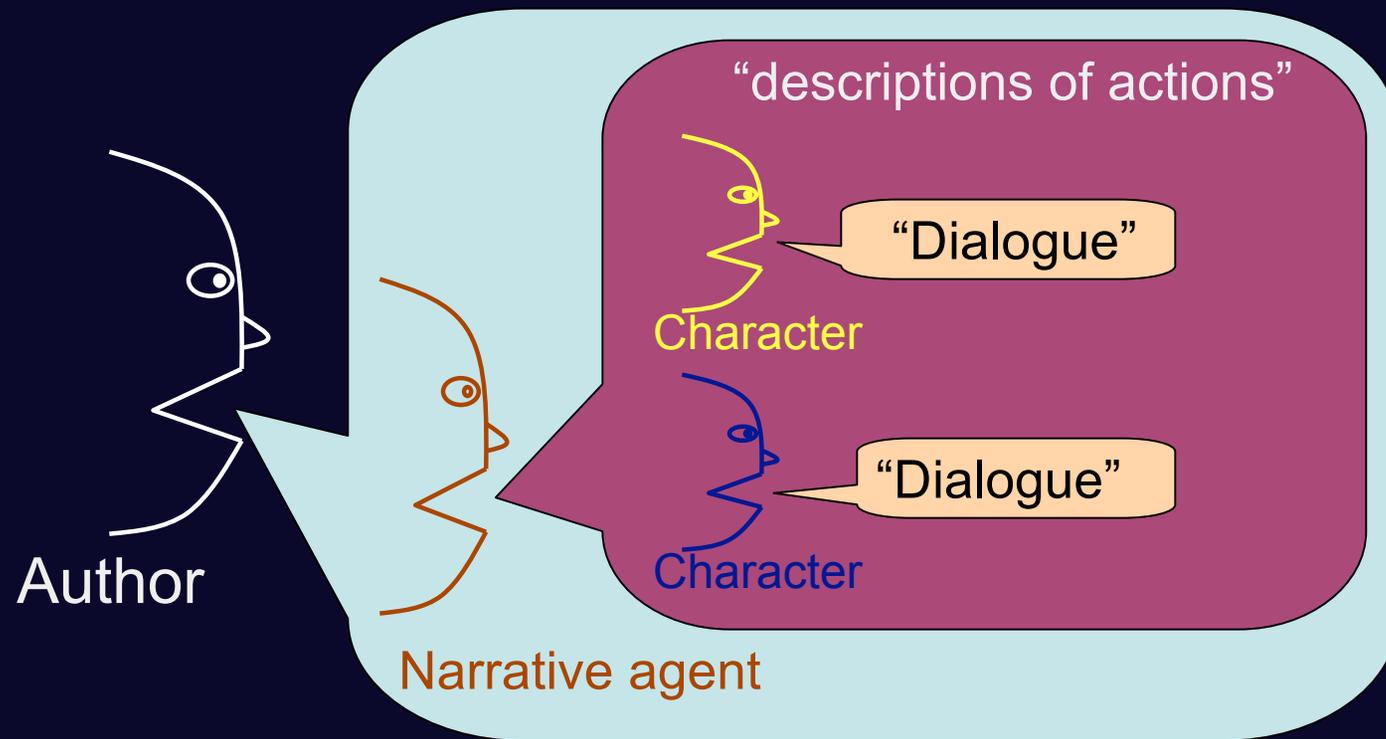
The power of the abstracting perceiver

- Liberal Answer:
 - Well, that's not enough information to answer the question! Does the man look poor or oppressed? Have I ever done anything to him that would inspire him to attack? Could we run away? What does my wife think? What about the kids? Could I possibly swing the gun like a club and knock the knife out of his hand? What does the law say about this situation? Does the Glock have an appropriate safety built into it? Why am I carrying a loaded gun and what kind of message does this send to society and my children? Is it possible he'd be happy with just killing me? Does he definitely want to kill me or would he just be content to wound me? If I were to grab his knees and hold on, could my family get away while he was stabbing me? This is all so confusing! I need to debate this with some friends for a few days to try to come to a conclusion.

The power of the abstracting perceiver

- Conservative Answer:
 - BANG!
- The deceptively simple act of story modeling used to passively endorse a political viewpoint or value system.
 - Who is rewarded and who is punished?
 - What is possible and what is not an option?
 - Same for all fables, anecdotes, even literature and film.
 - When does this abstraction apply to the real world?

The bias of the narrative agent



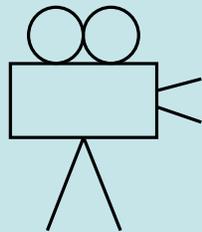
Narrative agent works at discourse level

The problem with a powerful narrative agent

- We never know who is speaking to us!
 - What is their purpose in telling us the story?
 - What are their prejudices?
 - What are their hidden agendas?
- Controls not just the interpretation of facts, but the facts themselves!
- Example: Tanya's Moscow pictures

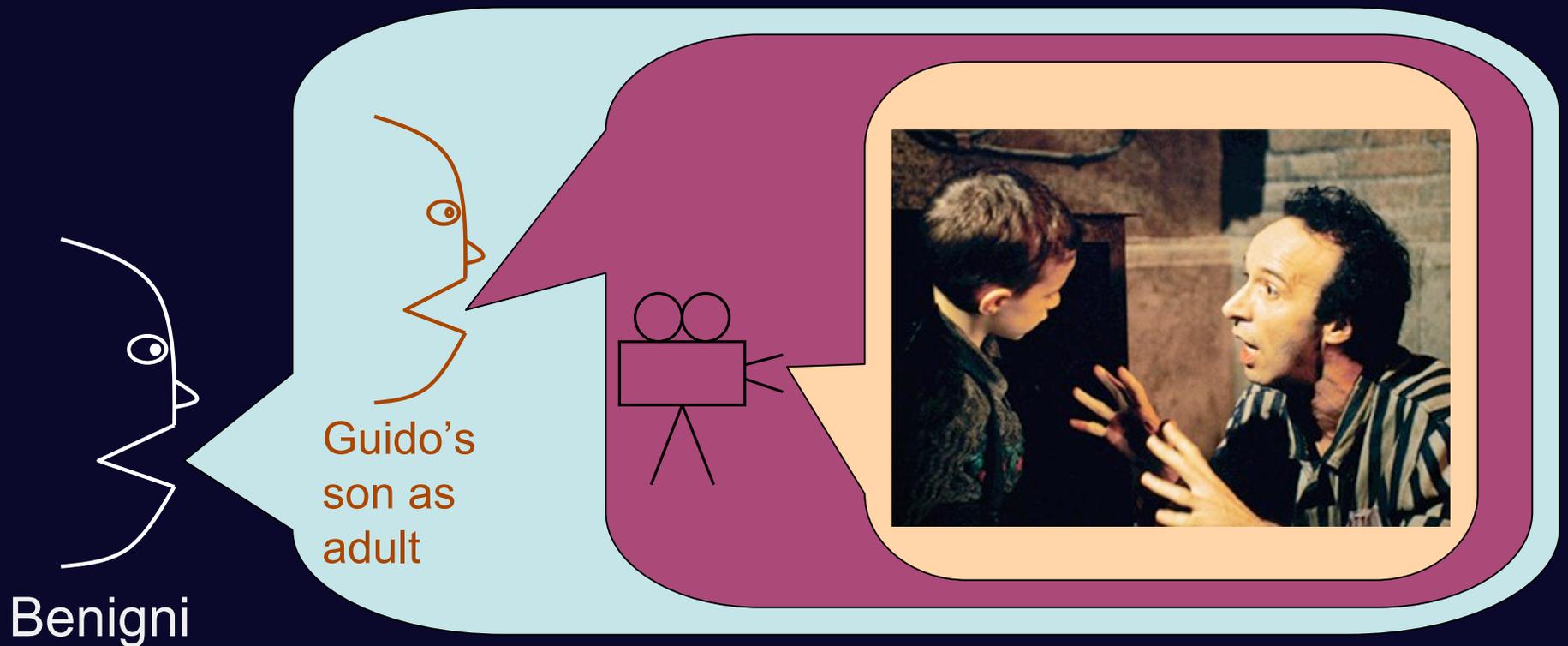
Ambiguous agent: *La Vita è bella*

During the movie



Ambiguous agent: *La Vita è bella*

After the coda



The movie looks the same to us!

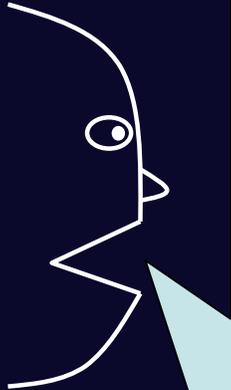
How can we be sure it accurately depicts its own story-world?

Ambiguous agent: *Sherlock Holmes*

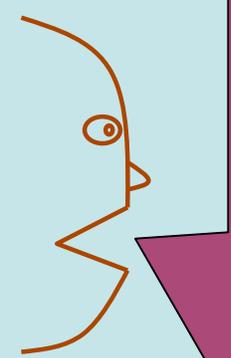
As of the first story, *A Study in Scarlet*

“A Study in Scarlet, Chapter 1”

Conan
Doyle



Watson



“He gripped my hand with strength...”

Holmes



“You have been in
Afghanistan, I
perceive.”

Watson



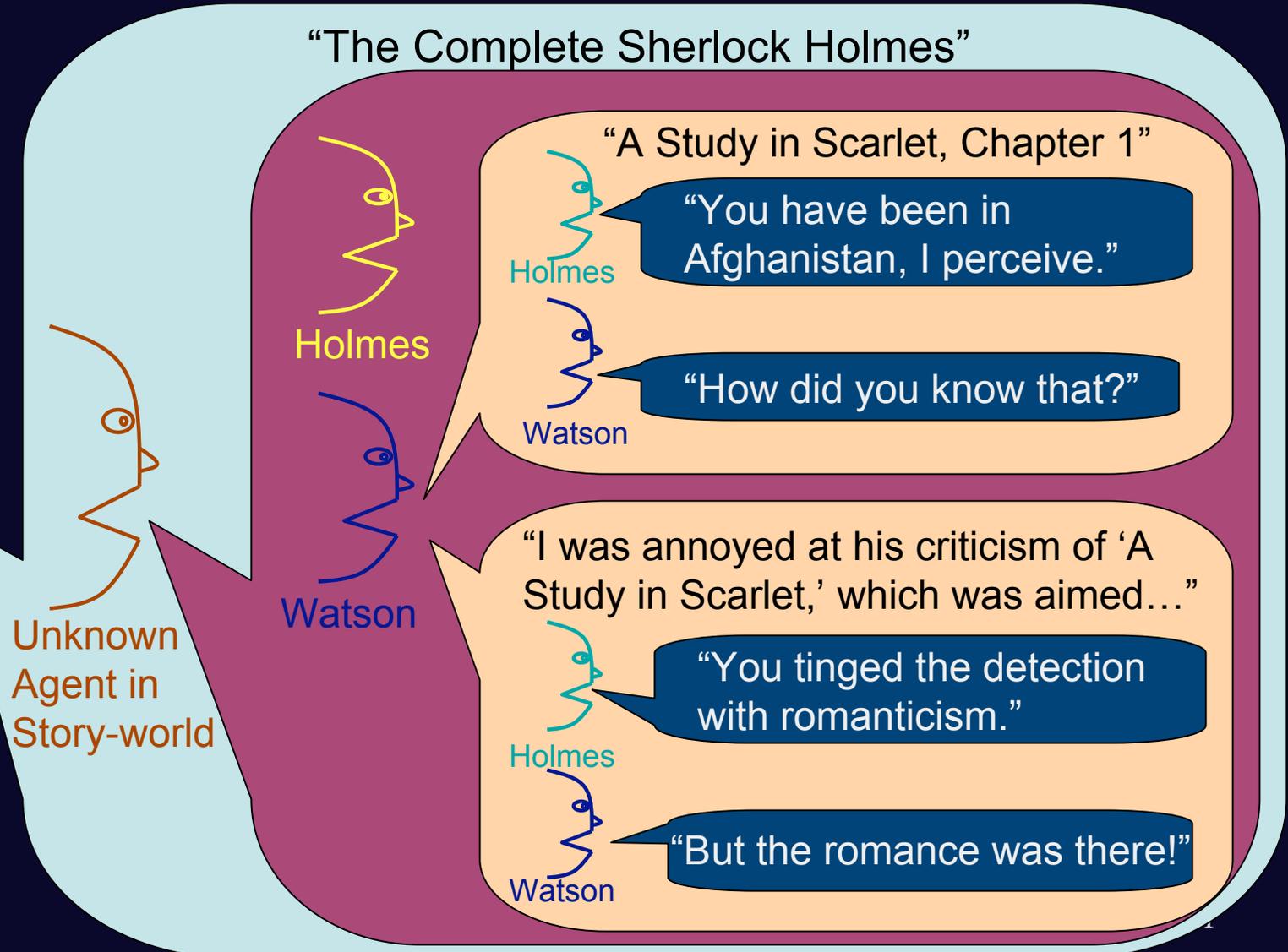
How did you know that?”

Ambiguous agent: *Sherlock Holmes*

As of the second story, *The Sign of Four*

It might
be even
deeper!

Conan
Doyle



"The Complete Sherlock Holmes"

"A Study in Scarlet, Chapter 1"

Holmes

"You have been in
Afghanistan, I perceive."

Watson

"How did you know that?"

Holmes

Watson

"I was annoyed at his criticism of 'A
Study in Scarlet,' which was aimed..."

Holmes

"You tinged the detection
with romanticism."

Watson

"But the romance was there!"

To Ask Your Narrative Agent

- Why does the story happen now and why not then?
- Why are the characters here and why not there?
- Who are you?
- What is your intention?
- What do you expect me to know or believe?
- Are you telling me the truth?
- How do you want me to react?



This is a Necessary Evil: The Heisenberg literary principle

- Facts are illuminated by the agent's perception. Unperceived facts can only be guessed.
- We must be biased toward a particular interpretation in order to recognize narrative semantics (i.e., parse the narrative).
- Otherwise, what do we get?

Cubism



Doable, but difficult to impose narrative patterns to make it palatable!

Literary anthropic principle

- The observable story is the way it is because that's the only part we are able to perceive.
- Every fact that was **chosen** to be conveyed by someone **arguing** for his or her particular view of the story.
- Know thy agents well!
 - Each sentence must **justify** its inclusion: it doesn't just happen, it happens and it must be told

The Plot



1. Pattern Recognition
2. Selection Bias
3. ***The Compartment***

Why is this relevant?

- What struck me about *The Compartment* was the strength and bias of the narrative agent.
 - Much closer to the protagonist than in *The Darling* or most other third-person stories we've read.
 - Closer than many first-person stories!
 - Challenges our trust, our narrative parse

The role of Carver's agent

- “Argues” his version of the story and backstory under the guise of telling
 - Reflects his biases in careful word choice
 - Omits contrary factors
- Binding narrative agent so tightly to Myers gives a well-utilized palette for concise characterization.
 - The way he sees things doubles as characterization.

Micro-bias

	Myers	Omniscient
References to son	His son	Joel (?)
References to wife	Son's mother	Susan (?)
Recollection of quarrel	Violent details	Rationale
Train station	Domestic bliss	Son's location
Scenery outside	Woman at crossing	Landscapes (?)
Adjacent cars	Second-class car	Following car
Milan trip	Television brand	Places seen

Macro bias

- The watch goes missing, and Myers only considers theft.
- Myers only blames the son for all ills.
 - Examples
- Myers only relates the lonely episodes of his life.

The Watch: Knowability matrix

	Happens	Does not happen
Perceived	Man in compartment sleeps Woman waits at crossing	Possible reunions with son
Unperceived	Watch falls to floor (?) Man waits at crossing (?) Myers the cause for wife to leave him (?)	Son decides to not come (?) Son decides to come with his forgiving mother (?)

The son deserves all the blame?

- By the anthropic principle, the story is as the story is told.
 - Too challenging for our causality model?
 - At what point do we begin to doubt the hand that feeds us?
- Why does Myers change his mind?
 - Juxtaposed to losing expensive watch
 - Key intervening events omitted?

Aggression theme

- Constantly selects details of death, destruction, violence, and envy.
 - Breaking china rather than content of argument
 - “Sorry” about leaving Italy, not about losing eight years with son and wife
 - Envious of sleeping companion in compartment
 - Assumes companion stole watch and barely keeps himself from striking him
 - Lunges at boy

Loneliness/Communication theme

- Wants to live in a house with a wall
- “Lucky” to have single-occupancy compartment
- Workaholic engineer
- Can’t make self understood to others
- No communication with son or son’s mother
- No one to tell about trip but secretary
- Walked around Rome by himself (regretful)
- No one referred to by name but himself
- Only outgoing or tangential dialogue (except for passport request), even in flashback

Time

- Loses years with son
- Notices clocks
- Loses wristwatch
- Open-ended vacation

Class

- First sentence: “first class rail car”
- Loss of expensive watch is catalyst to change his mind against reunion
- Looks down at second-class population
- Mentions taste for classical music

Reading of first few pages

Open questions, outstanding wants

- From first 4-5 paragraphs:
 - Why hadn't we seen the boy in 8 years?
 - unanswered
 - What was the quarrel about? Why the split?
 - questionable answer
 - What will happen at the reunion?
 - answered
 - Why is the story happening?
 - answered (letter)

The crux of the talk

- Myers as a **character** has no power over many of the events in this story that feed into the perception.
- There is a tension between Myers's hand and Carver's hand.
 - Carver, or a *second* agent, must impose *narrative semantics* onto the story.
 - Goals, tension, open questions, irony, etc.
 - Presence of life “hinges” that make the story worth telling (expected outcomes are boring)
 - *Adaptation* quote

Narrative Parse: Goals

- Stacked, conscious:
 - To reunite with son (abandoned)
 - To recover watch (abandoned)
 - To recover lost peace in compartment (failed)
 - To achieve sleep (succeed)
 - Symbolism of each reaches to interpretation
- Unconscious:
 - To make a connection (succeed, with jovial men)
 - To keep his luggage and destination intact (failed)

Sources of tension	Myers	Carver
Reunion time-bomb	Speculation of possible futures	Story framing; eight years of separation
Leftover conflict with family	Blame of son and violent remembrance	Past conflict
Communication barrier	Only outgoing dialogue, only names self	Foreign-country setting
Watch goes missing	Emphasis on cost and import	Myers visits WC to wash face; insertion of “plants” of coat-handling details
Theft assumed	Only theft-based narratives considered	
Solitude disturbed	Solitude emphasized as important	Man enters compartment
Unable to sleep	Envy toward sleeping companion	Obtains sleep at end
Decoupled from luggage	Resignation to going somewhere	Prior “planting” of 2nd-class car

Value system applied to ending

- Life hits a hinge
- Loses everything material but gains tolerance of companionship (and sleep)
 - Juxtaposition implies causality and requires interpretation

Summary

- We innately trust our perceiver, only as far as we accept the plausibility of causality
- Aligning the perceiver so close to a character is good for compact characterization
 - It's not the facts, it's one's argument of the facts
 - Must address tension of imposing narrative semantics simultaneously and controlling factors that feed naturally into perception

FIN