Incongruity Resolution and Humour

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Content of this talk

Review (briefly) the idea of “incongruity”

Look at "incongruity-resolution" in jokes.

Consider the computational perspective.

What is incongruity? (0)

Incongruity (*noun*) : lack of accordance with what is reasonable or fitting; unsuitableness, inappropriateness, absurdity; lack of harmony of parts or elements; incoherence.

Some incongruity jokes

- “I went to a general store. They wouldn’t let me buy anything specifically.” (Steven Wright)
- “Imagine if there were no hypothetical situations.”
- “She’s so fat, she has other fat people orbiting around her.”

What is incongruity? (1)

Nerhardt (1970): experiment in which people had to lift a sequence of objects.

After a few items with a consistent pattern of weight, there would be an inconsistent item.

On lifting the “surprise” element, people tended to express amusement.

Nerhardt's analysis (1976):

A 12-point definition of what it means to set up an expectation.

Based on that, a definition of incongruity:

> "The greater the divergence of a stimulus from expectation in one or many dimensions, the funnier the stimulus."

What is incongruity? (2)

“The perceiving of a situation or idea, L, in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, M1 and M2.”
(Koestler 1964)

“associating two generally accepted incompatibles; it is the lack of a rational relation of objects, people, or ideas to each other or to the environment”
(Gruner 1978)

“A conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs” (Shultz 1972)

For incongruity to be humorous, the setting must:

- not be threatening
- license playful oddities (e.g. talking animals)

Incongruity in things: the situation being described is itself “incongruous”

Incongruity in presentation: the way of presenting (e.g. in text or pictures) is incongruous.

(Morreall 1983)

Incongruity Resolution

To create humour, the incongruity must be RESOLVED.

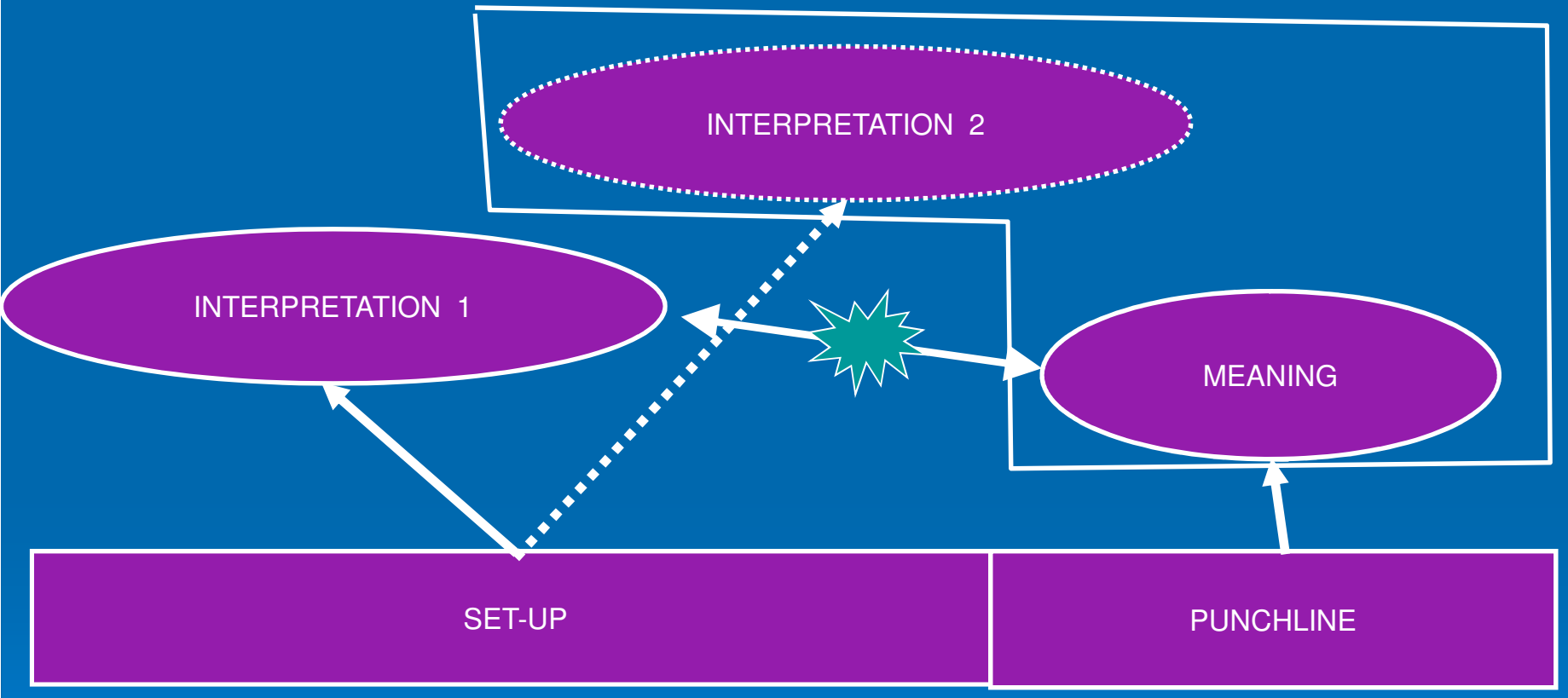
No accepted precise definition of what “resolved” (or “resolution”) means.

A common form of incongruity-resolution (textual) joke

"Do you believe in clubs for young children?"
"Only when kindness fails."

Customer: Do you mind if I try on that dress in the window?
Sales Assistant: Wouldn't it be better to use the fitting room?

Why do birds fly south in winter?
It's too far to walk.


INTERPRETATION 2
INTERPRETATION 1
MEANING
SET-UP
PUNCHLINE

The way it works, informally

A joke consists of a "set-up", then a "punchline".

The punchline conflicts with a perceived interpretation of the set-up.

The punchline can be resolved with an alternative interpretation of the set-up.

Sometimes identified with "incongruity-resolution".

Sometimes claimed to be the form of all jokes.

A common form of incongruity-resolution (textual) joke

"Do you believe in clubs for young children?"
"Only when kindness fails."

Lexical ambiguity

Customer: Do you mind if I try on that dress in the window?
Sales Assistant: Wouldn't it be better to use the fitting room?

Syntactic ambiguity

Why do birds fly south in winter?
It's too far to walk.

Focus ambiguity

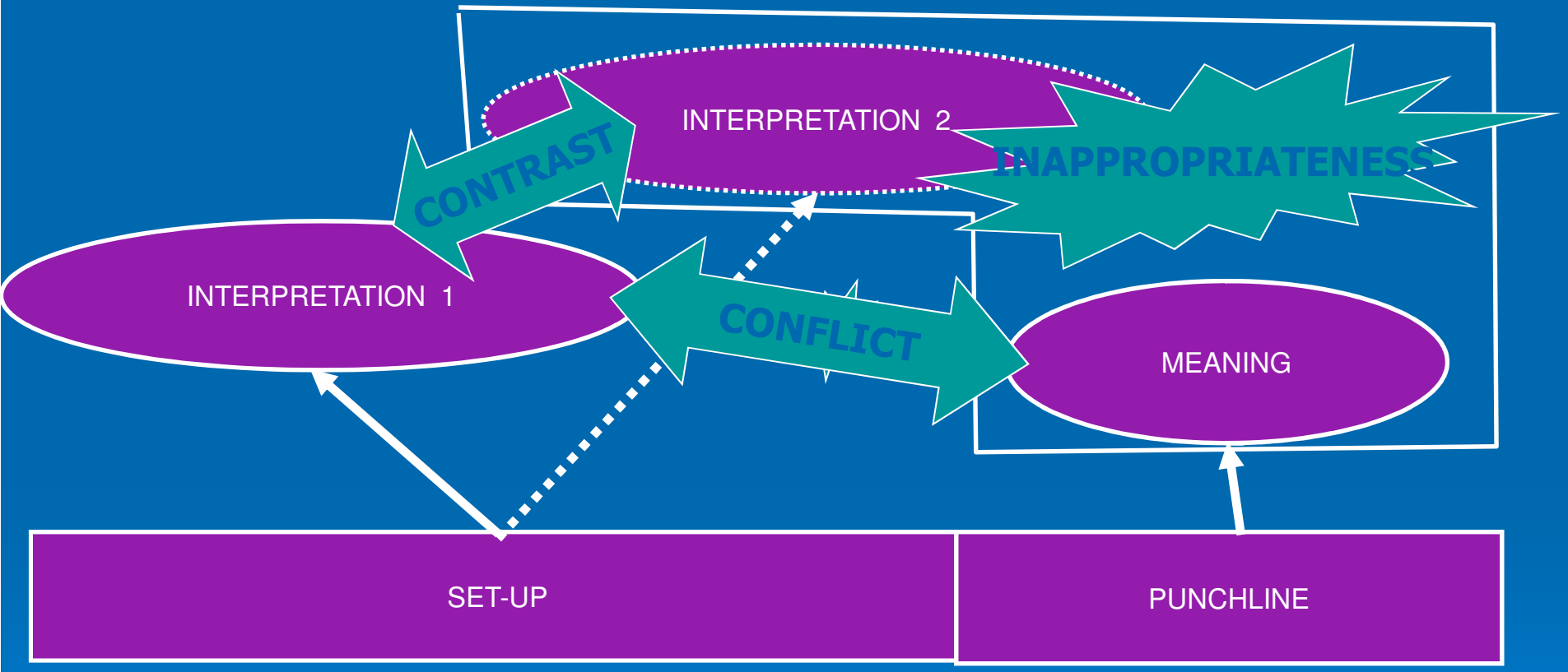
So it’s about linguistic ambiguity?

"Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.
"No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply. "Come right in."
(Raskin 1985)

No linguistic ambiguity.

The events described can have two interpretations.

Where exactly is the incongruity situated?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“Conflict”

The punchline does not immediately make sense with the most obvious reading of the set-up.

"Do you believe in clubs for young children?"
"Only when kindness fails."

Why do birds fly south in winter?
It's too far to walk.

"Inappropriateness":

"Do you believe in clubs for young children?"
"Only when kindness fails."

The first speaker considers hitting children with clubs to be beneficial.

Customer: Do you mind if I try on that dress in the window?
Sales Assistant: Wouldn't it be better to use the fitting room?

The customer-character wishes to change his/her clothing in the shop-window.

"Contrast":

A distinguished scientist was observing the heavens through the huge telescope at the Mt. Wilson Observatory. Suddenly he announced, "It's going to rain."

"What makes you think so?" asked his guide.

"Because," said the astronomer, still peering through the telescope, "my corns hurt."

The "obvious" interpretation (astronomer is assessing subtle scientific data) contrasts with final interpretation (astronomer is using a homely piece of folk-wisdom).

Summary : forced reinterpretation jokes

- The set-up has more than one interpretation.
- One of these interpretations is more obvious.
- The punchline is incompatible (CONFLICT) with the most obvious interpretation of the set-up.
- The meaning of the punchline can be integrated with a less obvious interpretation of the set-up ("resolved"?).

MISUNDERSTANDING + CORRECTION

- This integrated interpretation has some further properties (e.g. CONTRAST with the original interpretation, or internal INAPPROPRIATENESS).

What is “resolution” ?

Why did the elephant sit on the marshmallow?
Because he didn't want to fall into the hot chocolate.

Rothbart & Pein say the question provides incongruity, the answer resolves this and supplies more incongruity.

"...the resolution... is not a 'real' resolution: it does not get rid of the incongruity -- it actually introduces more of the same -- but because it has some distorted verisimilitude it is accepted playfully as a pseudo-resolution."
(Attardo 1994: 144)

Some possible attributes of “resolution”

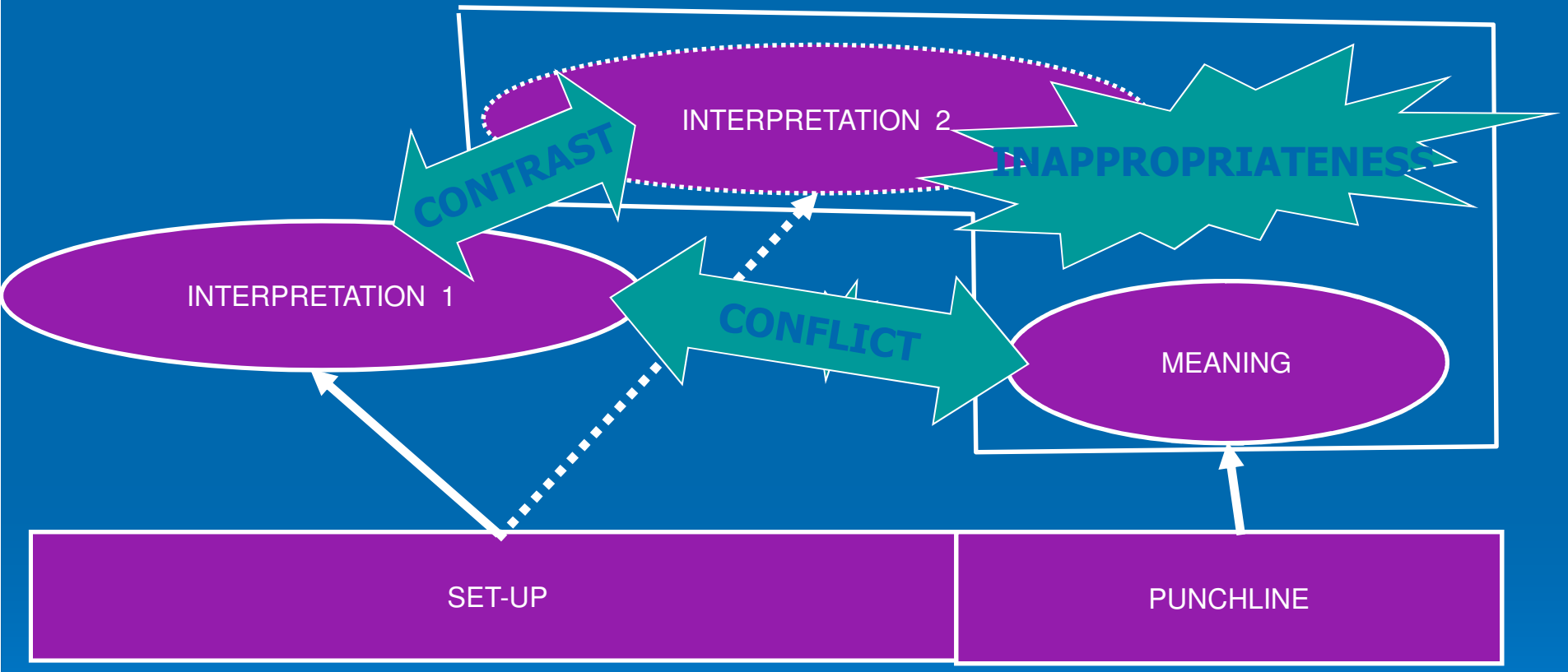
a) Resolution makes the original incongruity no longer incongruous. (“full resolution”)

b) Resolution makes the original incongruity less incongruous. (“partial resolution”)

c) The incongruity raises a “question” to which the resolution acts as the “answer”.

d) Resolution shows how (within the story world) the incongruity arises.

e) The incongruity must occur first, followed by the resolution.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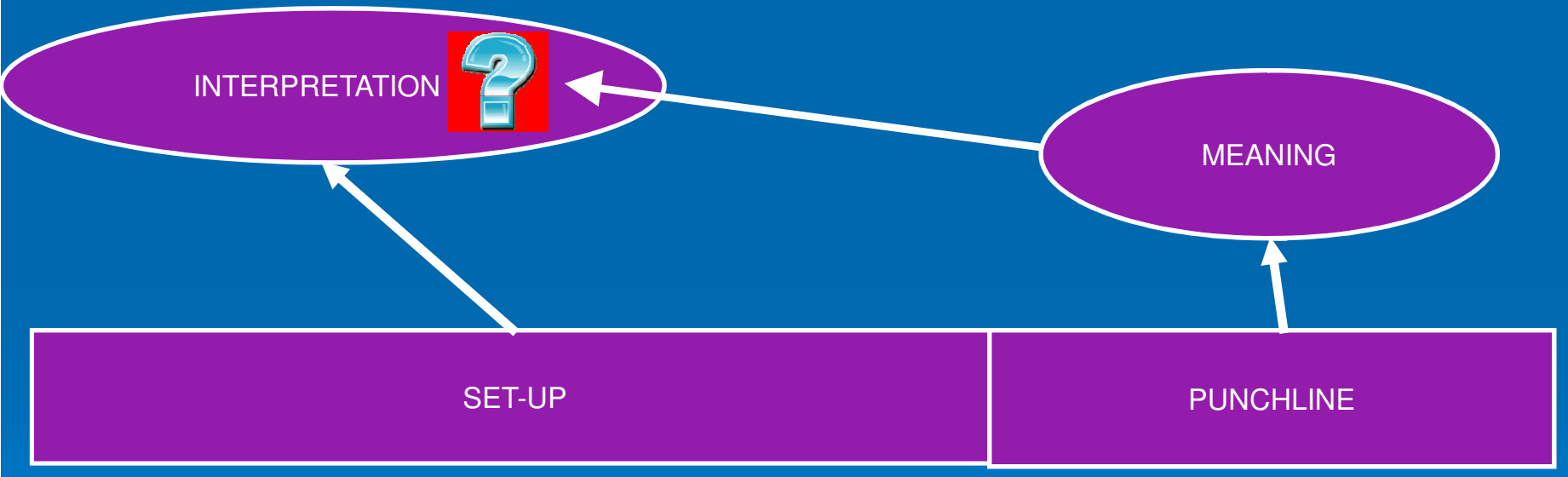
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What about computation?

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- ✓ IR is very general
- ✓ IR is about semantic notions
- ✓ Knowledge representation techniques might be useful
- ✓ IR is sequential (a process)

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- ○ IR is not formally defined
- ○ There are many versions
- ○ IR relies on complex knowledge manipulation
- ○ Many IR jokes need other support (e.g. narrative)

Summing up

- Incongruity is a dominant idea in explaining humor mechanisms.
- Incongruity + resolution is widely cited as the accepted view of how humour works.
- Forced reinterpretation is a commonly proposed version of incongruity-resolution for jokes.
- There are no precise or accepted definitions of “incongruity” or “resolution”.
- So far, computational work has not made much use of IR.

Developing the Incongruity-Resolution Theory
Graeme Ritchie (1999).
Pp. 78-85 in *Proceedings of AISB Symposium on Creative Language: Stories and Humour,* Edinburgh,.

Variants of Incongruity Resolution
Graeme Ritchie (2009)
Pp. 313-332 in Journal of Literary Theory, Vol 3 No 2.