

**From Srona to Sportello: Making Meaning Through Narrative**

By

Quinn Riesenman

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Professor David Fiordalis

The passing of information between people largely comprises human life. Depending on *how* people pass information, action takes place in the world upon its reception. Because of life's unending supply of situations and occurrences that force people to respond in one way or another, people crave information that provides them with a clear role in and a means of responding to the uncertainties of life. People not only want the world to *make sense*, they want that sense to include them in some way. This fact, perhaps obvious, is taken for granted. What is not as obvious is *how* people turn the raw transpiration of what takes place in their worlds into something meaningful, something that inspires action and belief. One way people make meaning out of information is by interpreting it through complex narratives. Without narration, what happens in the world remains fragmented. Looking at how the narrative components of *The Story of Kotikarna*, a centuries-old story with its origins in the Indian Buddhist narrative tradition, and Thomas Pynchon's 2009 novel *Inherent Vice* work to create meaning for their audiences will show that narrative constructions in general are how people make meaning out of the world.

### **Meaning and Narrative**

Defining both *meaning* and *narrative* is necessary before proceeding into the details of the two narratives themselves. *Meaning* here should be thought of as the human-created and human-perceived value and importance of something's existence in the world, and also as that which the value and importance suggest about the nature of the world and our role in it. To establish meaning is to establish a connective relationship between things and ideas in the world. For instance, if someone says "Trees mean a lot to me," she is expressing that trees are

valuable and important things in the world as she sees it, or that the world's importance and value are in some way reliant on the existence of trees. The *reasons* behind her attribution of meaning to trees are potentially unlimited: she might rely on trees as an income source, she might need trees to keep warm during the winter, she may know that trees produce oxygen, she might think of trees as living creatures with souls, or as sacred embodiments of divinity. Despite the potentially endless number of reasons behind her regarding trees as meaningful, their role as things that shape her world, as things that provide her with a clear context for her actions, and as things that give her a sense of value, importance, and order is the key to understanding *meaning*. That being said, the *process* of the formation or adoption of the reasons – whatever they may be – behind her attribution of meaning to trees is this paper's primary concern. That process is the act of *narration*.

*The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* defines narrative as “the representation of an event or a series of events” (Abbot 2008, 13). At first glance, this definition may seem both simple and obvious. This is probably because of how deeply entrenched the representation of events is in our day-to-day lives, and how much it is wrapped up in our human-ness. In *The Tale-Tellers*, one of Nancy Huston's main claims is her equation of humanity to narrativity. Huston argues that human identity is comprised solely of what she calls *fictions* – the stories we tell each other and ourselves about who we are and how the world is – that cannot be removed from our interactions with the world and each other: “Fictions permeate the human world. To say that a world is human is to say that it is permeated with fictions” (Huston 2008, 26). So, if the description of a narrative as “the representation of an event or series of events” sounds too familiar or simple, it is because we are always engaged in creating narratives and living inside

them. Indeed we are constantly “representing events” for any number of reasons. However, thinking about what is implied by the word *representation* quickly complicates the initial simplicity.

For an event to be *represented*, it first has to be “presented”, and for an event to be presented, it has to be observed or imagined. (To say that an event is “presented” to observers seems a little strange, for it implies an agent behind the event that pops the events up in front of observers; I am not trying to make this impression, but am only using the wording of the definition. We could say that the original “presentation” of the event is the occurrence of the event before it is *recreated* through narrative.) Nested in this process is a potentially unobserved, but incredibly important element: that in order for the event that is “presented” to the observer to be *represented*, it has to be *meaningful* in some way, at least to the observer. In other words, the observed event has to connect to or provide insight into things in the world in a notable way. Without the observer’s designation of meaning to the observed or imagined events, what need would there be to represent them in the future? After all, people very much need to find connective relationships in the world in order to make it a tolerable place to exist.

For instance, let’s imagine that someone out on a walk observes a wild squirrel sitting on top of a fencepost eating a candy bar. Chances are, unless this occurs regularly for this person, the person will *represent* the scene to their friends by way of a narrative. Consequently, the rest of what the walk “presented” to that person will most likely remain unrepresented, for in light of the eventful occurrence of the squirrel and the candy bar, the rest of the walk perhaps seems relatively void of meaning. The *quality of or reasoning behind* the meaning is,

again, potentially unlimited (here we can see how meaning can simply be the value of irony or humor), but the person's decision to represent *this* instead of *that* signifies the process of *meaning-making* and its parallel process of *narration*. So here we can see that meaning is the necessary, unavoidable product of the narration of events. For in the singling out of details there lays the implication of a spectrum of importance in the world of detail as perceived by the observer. At one end of this spectrum are those details found most meaningful and, therefore, worthy of representation; on the other end, the mundane, ordinary details that lack weight as connective events.

An objection to the notion that meaning is created solely through "the representation of events" is that meaning seems to already be present in the events themselves prior to their representation. When the walker observes the squirrel take a bite out of the candy bar, their immediate internal reaction to the event that occurs (in this case humor or confusion) seems to imply that the event contains its own latent meaning: the sole act of seeing the squirrel incites a nearly immediate reaction. So then isn't meaning imbedded in the act itself, instead of being a product of the observer's representation of it? Isn't the direct experience of the humor brought on by the candy-eating squirrel proof that meaning does not need to be *represented* in order to exist? My answer is no. Our tendency to narrativize is so deeply woven into our beings that we almost immediately reconstruct the event in our heads in order to understand and contextualize it. (If you have a hard time believing this, simply sit quietly for a few moments and notice how your thoughts immediately start spinning of tales from the mind's passing stimuli.) The squirrel and its candy are perhaps nothing to the observer until her internal narrator – itself a product of other narratives – assembles what she believes about the event: that candy is

people food, and that squirrels eating people food is absurd or perhaps cute, and therefore the sight of a squirrel eating a candy bar is both humorous and, if she *represents* the situation adequately to them, something your friends might also find humorous. We narrate the world that pours into us to ourselves, and then recreate the meaning we've created internally through yet another layer of narrative. Complex, written narratives are artifacts of this process.

### **Complex Narratives**

Now that we've discussed narrative and meaning as basic, everyday acts and outcomes, defining more precisely what it means for a narrative to be *complex* is necessary. So far, we have regarded very straightforward examples of narrative for the sake of understanding it, but now we have to distinguish between the nearly instinctual, day-to-day representation of perceived events (the observer's representation of the candy-squirrel, for instance) and more meticulously-arranged devices of meaning-making (*Inherent Vice* and *The Story of Kotikarna*). I want to emphasize complex narratives as *devices for meaning-making* here. We can reasonably assume that longer, written narratives represent events and produce specific flavors of meaning for very particular reasons that are distinct from everyday narratives. The meticulousness and specificity of their constructions implies an underlying significance in their structures; again this significance can be of any sort, but as far as they are arranged, focused, and absorbed by audiences, they are devices of meaning-making.

Longer narrative structures like *Inherent Vice* and *The Story of Kotikarna* occupy a slightly different categorization, the "loose and generally recognizable" range of narratives that Abbott provides early in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*: "the longer structures that

we call narratives even though they may contain much non-narrative material...the defining characteristic we look for at this level is some kind of narrative coherence” (Abbot 2008, 14). In other words, complex narratives are accumulations of individual events that produce an overarching narrative. Implicit in a complex narrative is the agreement that the story will on some level provide a clear sense of progression, eventually culminating to a point where the story “makes sense” and all the narrative’s accumulated micro-events establish an overarching narrative and illuminate the until-then-obscure structure that is arguably more than the sum of its individual events. As intentional constructions that demonstrate the relationship between a series of purposefully represented events, complex narratives are incredibly valuable lenses that will allow us to look into the process of meaning-making.

*The Story of Kotikarna* and *Inherent Vice* undoubtedly represent the range of what it can mean to be a complex narrative. *The Story of Kotikarna* is, in Andy Rotman’s translation, a 31-page story broken up into eight sections that are titled after the main event in that section. In Joel Tatelman’s translation, there are no headings or division of the story into sections – it reads straight through. As we will see later on, *The Story of Kotikarna* is a single narrative that builds its cumulative meaning through the linear depiction of smaller narrative events. *Inherent Vice* is a 369-page novel with 21 chapters. The chapters follow little pattern as far as where they end or begin, though roughly they chart a day or two of the narrative at a time, running linearly through the story-time until the end of the novel. *Inherent Vice*, too, is complex in the way most contemporary novels are complex: it depicts characters’ many interactions in order to generate a larger narrative structure.

Using these two stories obviously raises with a few potential issues, the most glaring one being the lack of symmetry between the actual spans and scopes of each narrative. Part of this simply has to do with either story's style and degree of clarity and concision in its depictions of events. Another point of disruption is the fact that *Inherent Vice* – in this paper – is being quoted in its original English, and connects with a modern audience through its relatable humor and references. *The Story of Kotikarna* has gone through hundreds of years of telling and re-telling, having been transcribed and translated over and over, appearing in English only recently; what to its original audience was probably heard very differently, we cannot help but overlay our own expectations and assumptions onto. This may affect how we read the story, but the story's narrative components remain the same. Aside from these factors, *Inherent Vice* and *The Story of Kotikarna* are both self-contained narratives. Despite how different they appear on the surface in length, content, style, and history, it is their self-contained nature as single complex narrative arcs that consist of smaller depictions of events that matters as far as the analysis of each goes. The ability to observe the mechanics at work in either narrative will disrupt the potential issues stemming from their lack of symmetry.

For most of chapter two of *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Abbott focuses his explications on the mechanics that make narratives (including complex narratives) tick. He breaks narrative down into two fundamental elements: story (which he “subdivides further” into *events*, *entities*, and *setting*) and narrative discourse (Abbot 2008, 19). Story is the events that take place in the narrative itself, while narrative discourse is the object of the text, the particular arrangement of the words in the sentences, the sentences in the paragraphs, and so forth. Discussions of narrative discourse tend to focus on the technical aspects of story-telling –

how certain linguistic patterns or usages affect meaning – while discussions of story tend to focus on how the content of the narrative flows to generate a unified device of meaning-making. To put it another way, *story* can be transferred relatively easily between mediums (consider *Inherent Vice's* film adaptation) whereas *narrative discourse* (in written narratives) is largely tied to itself as a text. As far as narratives themselves go, the two are inseparable, each begetting the other. The way either *Inherent Vice* or *The Story of Kotikarna* employs these certain narratological components affects what kind of meaning they create for audiences. The three main narrative components I will be focusing on are constituent events, supplementary events, and narrators.

*The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* defines constituent events as “the turning points, the events that drive the story forward and that lead to other events” (Abbot 2008, 22). The observer’s instinct to strain out and clearly represent the most meaningful aspects of a situation shows how key constituency is in narratives: in order to impart what the observer initially perceived as meaningful, it is necessary to relate all the events that led up to their impression of meaning in order to reasonably suggest why it should be seen, by the audience, as meaningful. To not provide constituency usually prompts people to demand that the story “gets to the point” because no clear, direct meaning or path to meaning is being communicated. To provide constituency is to follow through on what could reasonably be regarded as the most fundamental expectation of narration: to establish clear relationships between events. Narratives punctuated by these points of constituency aren’t just popular, they are expected, and people’s negative reactions toward narratives without them are nearly automatic. Narratives that fail to provide necessary points of constituency are sometimes

regarded as incomplete, frustrating, and not worthy of retelling, because they fail to establish clear relationships between things and ideas in the world.

Supplementary events, on the other hand, “don’t lead anywhere. They can be removed and the story will still be recognizably the story that it is” (Abbot 2008, 23). To use an analogy: constituent events are the joists, the pillars, the load-bearing walls that give the house its functional capacity as a house, whereas supplementary events are the trinkets, knick-knacks, decorations on the walls and draped over the couches that make the house *home* to its occupants, and give visitors an idea of who lives there. Supplementary events are necessary in a different, no less essential way: “[they] invariably have their own impact and can carry a considerable amount of the narrative’s burden of meaning” (Abbot 2008, 24). The importance of supplementary events should not be under-emphasized here. Surely, the walker who saw the squirrel could narrate the event very directly, and successfully represent it without going into too much detail about the particulars of her experience. But the more detail she provides her audience about the look on the squirrel’s face, the exact brand of candy bar, the way the squirrel’s tail twitched as it took a final bite, all add up to produce a much more believable, tangible, and enchanting narrative, despite not being the “pillars” of the story itself. In fact, one could argue that without these details, the story would not really be all that worth telling in the first place. However, there is a fine balance in the use of supplementary events: if the walker spent twenty minutes discussing the quality of the squirrel’s hair, what was going on in the background, the sounds of the park, the precise quality of light that day, or the irrelevant events leading up to the discovery of squirrel, then the narrative dissolves along with the audience’s attention. Tweaking the focus on either constituents or supplements affects the

overall communication of meaning. By looking at how *Inherent Vice* and *The Story of Kotikarna* blend constituent and supplementary events, we can get our first look into how the two stories function as meaning-makers.

### ***Inherent Vice***

In *Inherent Vice*, supplementary details distort the story's constituent events, thereby complicating readers' expectations for a clear narrative. Because the novel is marketed partly as a detective story, readers expect to encounter a seemingly unsolvable set of preexisting events that are satisfyingly solved and explained through the story or by the narrator. The following paragraphs from an eNotes.com entry for *Inherent Vice* are the most concise and accurate summary of the novel one can hope to find. I include this summary not to help establish a clear understanding of what *Inherent Vice* is "about" as much as to try and demonstrate that even a brief summary of the novel requires the intertwining, tangling, and eventual lack of untangling of various plot strands. Meanwhile, closure and understanding – the moment in a detective story where all the strands' placements coalesce toward a precise explanation – arrives only partially, thereby limiting the fulfillment of a primary narratological desire: the creation of connective relationships. Reading the following also demonstrates that, despite the evasive quality of the story itself, audiences still go to great lengths to transform narratives into clear and linear series of events in order to best make meaning from them, even at the expense of much of the novel's implied meaning found only in its legions of supplementary events:

*"Inherent Vice* begins when Shasta Fay Hepworth arrives at the Gordita Beach residence of her former boyfriend, private investigator Doc Sportello. She persuades Sportello to save her lover, Mickey Wolfmann, from a plot to kidnap him and install him in a sanitarium. As Sportello begins his investigation of Wolfmann, an influential real-estate developer[...], Sportello is knocked unconscious and awakens to discover that one of Wolfmann's bodyguards has been murdered and Sportello is the prime suspect.

Sportello is contacted by Hope Harlingen, the widow of a saxophone player in a local surf band, who asks him to investigate her husband's suspicious drug overdose, and by Black Nationalist Tariq Kahlil, who is seeking an ex-convict who owes him money. A massage parlor attendant warns Sportello to beware of the Golden Fang and tells him that Coy Harlingen, the saxophone player, is not really deceased but is also looking for [Doc]. A pair of [FBI] agents then detain Sportello as part of an investigation of Black Nationalists, who they believe have kidnapped Wolfmann.

Soon, Sportello's investigations spread in all directions, and the mystery of the Golden Fang deepens. Sportello wanders through Los Angeles and local beach communities, has random sexual encounters with various women, and ingests one drug after another. Before long, he discovers a counterfeiting ring, anonymous telephone threats are made to his parents, Wolfmann and Hepworth disappear, and new theories surface about the bodyguard's killing. He eventually discovers that the saxophonist is being held against his will in a drug rehabilitation center and that the gang that murdered the bodyguard is actually a militia financed by the police department to do its dirty work. Sportello becomes a suspect in a second murder, this time of a dentist he interviewed, and at every turn he is roused by police detective Bigfoot Bjornsen, who pressures Sportello to provide him with information.

Sportello heads to a North Las Vegas casino and spies two FBI agents escorting Wolfmann off the premises. He further discovers that the developer has begun building a free-housing site in the desert, has redirected his assets into restoring the dilapidated casino, and has returned to his wife. Back at the beach, Sportello learns of a loan shark, Adrian Prussia, who murders adversaries with police cooperation and is also the killer of Bjornsen's former partner. When Sportello investigates this new lead, he is abducted and drugged. He escapes, kills Prussia, and is then rescued by Bjornsen, who plants heroin in Sportello's car to incur the wrath of drug dealers. After negotiating a return of the drugs, Sportello secures his parents' and the saxophone player's safety, and the novel ends with a few mysteries solved but many more still unresolved."

Reading such a condensed, constituency-centric version of the story demonstrates that if one strips away the supplemental details that crowd and complicate the overriding events described above, a tangled, largely unsolved knot of constituent events remains. I picked out at least seven strands of the narrative that, besides having Doc as their main agent, have their own trajectories (Doc looking for Mickey and Shasta; Doc trying to solve the murder of Glen Charlock; Doc trying to help Coy Harlingen; Doc trying to help Tariq Kahlil; Doc trying to uncover the secrets behind The Golden Fang; Bigfoot Bjornsen's and Doc's rivalry; Doc's attempt to expose the role of Adrian Prussia in the LAPD) and one overriding conflict (that could not necessarily be described as *constituent*) between people that have given hope in realizing and living the late 1960's "dream of prerevolution", those that work to keep "the faithless money-driven world" in power, and those that unwittingly fall in between (Pynchon 2009, 130). Exposing, solving, connecting, or at least conclusively addressing all these strands is something readers reasonably expect from the 369-page narrative. After all, people primarily crave and expect narratives that make clear meaning out of the events they represent, especially if that narrative happens to be framed as a detective story. However, as the last sentence in the summary indicates, *Inherent Vice* mostly refuses audiences' desire for *clear* constituency, exemplified here by a quote near the end of the novel: "But where was this tail he was on going to take [him] finally? How far in this weird twisted cop karma would he have to follow...before it led him to what he thought he needed to know? Which would be what again, exactly?" (Pynchon 2009, 350). However, a story that makes the search for constituency an unattainable desire for characters creates a kind of backwards constituency.

This deliberate lack of clarity does not, of course, stop audiences from rearranging, thereby revaluing, the narrative's events in order to try and make the meaning clearer or at least more obvious. In fact, one might even conclude that the purposefully labyrinthine quality of Pynchon's novels invites meticulous rearranging by audiences. Summaries and websites like pynchonwiki.com are devoted to dissecting and arranging them into their most digestible components. The *Inherent Vice* section of pynchonwiki.com features page-by-page annotations that define and explain the novel's references and plot points. The meticulousness of the annotations can be appreciate in their charting of real-world basketball games mentioned in the text in order to accurately date the timespan of the story (according to the website, the novel starts on Tuesday evening, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1970 and ends on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1970 which also happens to be Pynchon's 33<sup>rd</sup> birthday). In this sense, the novel creates meaning by imbedding real-world referents that readers can use to imbed the narrative in the real world. Along with highlighting how voraciously audiences will tease out their narratives, this reordering of the novel's events demonstrates how carefully structured the novel actually is, and therefore the deliberateness of the confusion arising from its tangled constituency.

Along with these websites, the range of critical, scholarly work that attempts to situate and explain Pynchon's novels is symptomatic of both the ambiguity of the novels' "true" meanings, and the entrenched tendency in readers to understand complex narratives by any means necessary. One example, published not on *Inherent Vice* but on Pynchon's earlier novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, demonstrates how elaborately some critics will critique in order to prove the correctness of their interpretations. In his essay "Seven Buddhist Themes in Pynchon's 'The Crying of Lot 49'", Robert Kohn tries to yoke Pynchon's notoriously cryptic novella to *The*

*Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Kohn's elaborate parallels ranging between tarp-wearing characters and Egyptian bird gods to sentences like this: "Oedipa's last name, Maas, is the Dutch word for the part of the Meuse River that flows through Holland, which spiritually connects her to Joyce's Anna Livia" (Kohn 2003, 76) demonstrate the richness and potentially endless conversations to be had between readers and Pynchon's texts. *Inherent Vice* anticipates and mimics the possibility of readings like the ones Kohn makes.

### **Constituents and Supplements**

Many of the novel's supplementary details and events depict characters employing – with wide ranges of certainty and consistency – various, sometimes outrageous, interpretations of what goes on throughout the course of the story. Even the narrator, as we will see later on, lacks a conclusive authority on which trail to follow. Because of this, readers – like the characters in the novel – move from one uncertainty to another, and are repeatedly grasping and losing hold of which events to centralize, or what the story seems to *need* to remain intact. The effect of the characters being unable to agree on how to think about their worlds, and the effect of their increasingly paranoid conclusions about their situations, is that the reader loses certainty in a single, constituent-driven narrative. This lack of narratological conclusiveness also disrupts the notion that the world outside the text can be understood in a single, reliable way. It mimics the simultaneous, contradictory existence of people's need to find or create clear meaning in life, and the difficulty in knowing what to believe in a world abundant with interwoven narratives. Four characters that employ their own interpretations and maintain

varying degrees of certainty about the world are Sauncho Smilax, Doc Sportello, Sortilège and Vehi Fairfield.

### **Sauncho Smilax**

Sauncho Smilax is a marine lawyer who represents Doc in his legal affairs. The two become involved with each other “by accident” after colliding shopping carts at the grocery store (Pynchon 2009, 26). Smilax elaborates repeatedly on what he watches on television: for him, ordinary, mundane details become sources of extraordinary significance, often distracting him from, and eventually replacing, his professional responsibilities. Prior to the following quote, Doc calls Sauncho on the phone to get bailed out of police custody. Sauncho ignores Doc and starts in with the following cartoon-related tirade: “It’s like Donald and Goofy, right, and they’re out in a life raft, adrift at sea? for what looks like weeks? and what you start noticing after a while, in Donald’s close-ups, is that he has this *whisker stubble*? like, growing out of his beak? You get the significance of that?” (Pynchon 2009, 28). Later, Sauncho, triggered by Charlie the StarKist tuna mascot in a television commercial, launches into a rant about how the commercial was a cleverly disguised and fairly disturbing “parable of consumer capitalism” (Pynchon 2009, 119). He then goes on to ask “Why is there Chicken of the Sea, but no Tuna of the Farm?” and reminds Doc “that Charles Manson and the Vietcong are *also* named Charlie” (Pynchon 2009, 119) without elaborating on what exactly these coincidences imply about anything besides the obvious. Later yet, Sauncho contemplates bringing a “class-action suit [...] against MGM itself” for not providing a disclaimer about the potential for “viewer’s mental confusion” while trying to parse out the metaphysical implications of the transition from the

black and white beginning of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) to its Technicolor remainder: “What’s [Dorothy’s] ‘normal’ Kansas color changing to?” (Pynchon 2009, 286). Later yet still, Sauncho actually pursues legal action against MGM Studios on behalf of “enough pissed-off viewers” who wanted the film *Mildred Pierce* to end differently (Pynchon 2009, 360).

The inclusion of a character like Sauncho Smilax – who repeatedly makes elaborate, paranoid sense out of mundane details in both film and television, and connects coincidental details of the world as evidence of large, obscure forces at work – mimics what audiences are called to do in order to sensibly arrange *Inherent Vice*, and calls to mind critics like Robert Kohn. When one assigns seemingly-arbitrary details with heavy significance, the line between constituents and supplements blurs, just like they do for Sauncho, who starts acting on his over-interpretations by way of lawsuits. Sauncho sets an example of a perfectly plausible (if not entirely sane) way someone might try to make sense of the novel and, by inference, the world.

### **Doc Sportello, Sortilège, & Vehi Fairfield**

As the private investigator at the heart of the novel’s various mysteries, Doc Sportello is torn between his desire to understand the past for the sake of resolving it, and the unstoppable movement toward an unpleasant and ungraspable future. Although his central concern seems to be making sure his ex-girlfriend Shasta is found safely, Doc also represents the collective effort to reconcile the woes of modern America by contextualizing them in history; he often ruminates on how to “find his way out of [this] vortex of corroded history, to evade somehow a future that seemed dark whichever way he turned” (Pynchon 2009, 110) and his role as the

frequently foggy portal between the past and future is repeatedly emphasized throughout the story (*sportello* means *door* or *window* in Italian, by the way).

Doc is cast as the good guy trying to find ways to uncomplicate other peoples' lives. He is described by the narrator, other characters, and himself as "[trying] to be groovy about most everything", "always true", and "[belonging] to a single and ancient martial tradition in which resisting authority, subduing hired guns, defending your old lady's honor all amounted to the same thing" (Pynchon 2009, 31, 5, 326). Doc is also a "pothead" who constantly smokes marijuana and experiences a variety of hallucinatory phenomena that – regardless of their being initiated by drugs – provide an avenue of understanding to the story's otherwise chaotic events. These phenomena repeatedly *show* him certain explanations for the world. But because of his persistent uncertainty and incessant use of marijuana, these visions always dissolve, leaving Doc to ponder once again the "glittering mosaic of doubt" (Pynchon 2009, 351) that he eventually fails to find a way connect.

Take, for example, the events that transpire in Chapter 7 after Doc visits Vehi Fairfield, "the closest thing to a real oracle...in [their] neck of the woods" (Pynchon 2009, 102). Doc is skeptical of Vehi's supposed prescience, but is convinced to consult him about Shasta's whereabouts by his close friend and spiritual confidant Sortilège, Vehi's pupil. Because of Vehi's supply of LSD and spiritual guidance, Doc interacts with a variety of otherworldly forces. At one point, after having taken LSD on Vehi's insistence, Doc is described as having acquired "hyperdensity" that, according to the text, literally allows him to "go through drywall construction with little discomfort" and "deflect simple weapons directed at him with hostile intent" (Pynchon 2009, 107). Despite the tendency for readers to interpret these more

psychedelic parts of the book as metaphor, hyperbole, or simply outright fantasy, the text insists on their actuality. This actuality, despite Doc's own persistent skepticism, supports Vehi and Sortilège as characters who are able to accurately (or at least consistently) situate the story's events in a larger schema, but it is left to the reader to decide if their conclusions fit.

Vehi Fairfield and Sortilège are two characters who confidently and consistently connect the events happening in the world, often providing Doc with ways to orient himself within the confusions that distract him: "On the face of it...two separate worlds, each unaware of the other. But they always connect someplace," says Vehi (Pynchon 2009, 107). Doc never fully believes the legitimacy of the "trips" Vehi puts him on, and mocks Vehi's confidence in his own spiritual powers: "'You got my message. You just don't know you did.' 'Oh. Sure, Woo-Woo Telephone and Telegraph, I keep forgetting.'" (Pynchon 2009, 108).

At one point, Vehi gives Doc "a piece of blotter with something written on it in Chinese. Maybe Japanese" that sends Doc off to find "himself in the vividly lit ruin of an ancient city that was, and also wasn't, everyday greater L.A." where "Doc and all his neighbors...were and were not refugees from the disaster which had submerged Lemuria thousands of years ago" (Pynchon 2009, 108-9). Lemuria, described by Sortilège, is "The Atlantis of the Pacific", the "lost continent" that, "before the Catholic Church, before the Buddha, before written history", "sunk into the sea because Earth couldn't accept the levels of toxicity [it'd] reached" (Pynchon 2009, 109). During Doc's "trip", he somehow intuits that the United States is the "middle term in [the] ancient rivalry [between Atlantis and Lemuria]," and is "repeating a karmic loop as old as the geography of [the Atlantic and Pacific] oceans". Vehi, embodied by a "Lemuro-Hawaiian demigod" named Kamukea, tells Doc – whose doubts swarm in around him – that "You don't

have to worry. That is another thing you must learn, for what you must learn is what I am showing you.” But Doc “[isn’t] sure what that means”, and is then brought out of the “trip” by Sortilège. He tries to explain this all to her, but she refuses to let him, only to then have Doc say, “after about a minute”, “What was I talkin about?” (Pynchon 2009, 110).

Parallels between modern America and Lemuria are drawn throughout the rest of the novel, with Doc generally in between the two as a skeptical interpreter. Despite this explanation being something Doc experiences directly (as shown above), he never fully integrates it into his beliefs, partially because of his underlying skepticism of the substance of Vehi and Sortilège’s powers, but partially because he is unsure whether or not such an insight *matters* at this point in history, especially if they are all indeed just acting out an inevitable “karmic loop”. Doc’s recurring beliefs regarding the irreversibility of history exclude the potential value of such a vast, karmic explanation from really making much of a difference in his personal life. This is shown on page 315 when Doc sees “a dark metallic gray promontory about the size of the Rock of Gibraltar” appear in the sky while driving down the street. He thinks

“about Sortilège’s sunken continent, returning, surfacing this way in the lost heart of L.A., and wondered who’d notice if it did. People in this town saw only what they’d all agreed to see, they believed what was on the tube or in the morning papers [...] and it was all their dream about being wised up, about the truth setting them free. What good would Lemuria do them?” (Pynchon 2009, 315).

Even if Doc were to believe Lemuria’s deep ties to his own and the country’s present circumstances as much as he literally *sees* it, he is dissuaded by the apparent lack of communal imagination – peoples’ inability to suspend normalcy – necessary for the Lemurian story to

divert people from what they already believe. Doc sees this large-scale lack of imagination – through the example of Lemuria – leading inevitably toward physical and spiritual catastrophe, a “sinking into the ocean”.

In fact, if Doc solves any mystery, it is that the disguised values of greed, distrust, and violence are so deeply entrenched in the American mind- and landscape that even the emergence of a sunken continent “in the lost heart of L.A.” would not be enough to wrench people away from their trajectories. On top of this, the discrediting and criminalization of drug culture as a whole and the experiences had therein (like Doc’s) by characters like Bigfoot Bjornsen and the larger national situation he represents makes any potentially corrective messages found in those experiences void outside of the heads that experience them. Bjornsen’s uncompromising distrust in the drug experience dismantles the potential value they may have for people like Doc: “Indians lived here long ago, they had a drug cult [...] [they] deluded themselves they were visiting other realities – why come to think of it, not unlike the hippie freaks of our present day” (Pynchon 2009, 355). Doc’s hallucinations – as insightful and instructive as they may be – will never again be regarded by the larger cultural setting as valid, leaving Doc and those like him in a kind of liminal space between reality and fantasy, which is a space Doc is often depicted in: inside and outside of history, a window. This discovery only makes Doc’s investigation “a fool’s attempt to find his way back into a past that [...] had gone on into the future it did” (Pynchon 2009, 314). Despite this seemingly paralyzing realization, the narrative injects positive meaning into an otherwise bleak finality through Doc’s refusal to cease acting on his responsibility to help those in need, and to value true connections when he may stumble upon them.

The novel displays these essential themes primarily through supplementary events and details. Sauncho's over-interpretation of television commercials – as we have seen – can easily be left out of an “accurate” summary of the novel's constituent events, as can Doc's inability to fully incorporate Vehi's and Sortilège's cosmic Lemurian connection narrative, but these two examples and the texture they infuse the novel with are the heart of *Inherent Vice*. The title itself suggests the importance of the realizations that arise from the supplemental ponderings of characters like Sauncho and Sportello, as referenced in this passage near the end of the book:

“It was as if whatever had happened had reached some kind of limit. It was like finding the gateway to the past unguarded, unforbidden because it didn't have to be. Built into the act of return finally was this glittering mosaic of doubt. Something like what Sauncho's colleagues in marine insurance liked to call inherent vice” (Pynchon 2009, 351).

The narrative constructs this kind of clear meaning by avoiding agreement between characters, and by providing so much supplemental detail that readers' search for the story parallels that of the characters'. In this, the novel refuses the audience access to expected forms of clarity, and demands that readers disrupt their notion of constituency in order to inhabit the uncertainty wrought throughout the novel. By reading how Doc deals with his uncertainty, we learn how to approach the text itself, and through Sauncho's over-interpretations we see the possibility of over-reading ourselves into a confident yet delusional narrative labyrinth. However, Doc's refusal to abandon his values as a change-maker holds the

novel together, and redeems the bitter truths one must go through to understand the potential of one's impact on the world.

### ***Inherent Vice's* Narrator**

*The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* attributes *voice*, *focalization*, and *distance* as the three main indicators to look for in narrators. Variations within these three indicators produce narrators whose control over or participation in the story they narrate affect the way the narrative communicates meaning. *Inherent Vice's* use of the free-indirect style of narration – that drifts between characters' voices with little indication of it doing so – supports the novel's communication of uncertainty.

The narrator only rarely drifts away from Doc Sportello's side, and at times almost entirely inhabits Doc's thoughts. For instance, a paragraph near the beginning of the book appears at first to be the narrator accessing Doc's internal monologue. But then the last sentence on the page – without quotation marks – says, "Sure, Doc answered himself, cool with me, man" (Pynchon 2009, 67) suggesting the narrator is not just indirectly quoting Doc's thoughts, but actually *is* Doc answering himself thinking about something, though this is not previously indicated by anything on the page. This happens several other times throughout the course of the story, where the narrator's description of the events link almost exactly with what the reader could easily imagine Doc describing the events as. The narrator even has access to Doc's dreams and hallucinations.

However, the proximity between Doc and the narrator expands every so often, disrupting the possibility that the narrator can be completely linked with Doc. For instance, the

narrator briefly has access to the motivations and thoughts of a dog named Myrna (Pynchon 2009, 127), and for nearly two pages diverts completely away from Doc to recount the romantic and disturbing interactions between Japonica Fenway and Dr. Rudy Blatnoyd (Pynchon 2009, 172-3). These diversions are not so frequent as to continually diverge the story – which would suggest an omniscient, unhindered narrator – but are frequent enough to disrupt the assurance of having the narrator be Doc-but-not-Doc.

The narrator's proximity to Sportello but brief excursions away from him once again establish the story as one riddled with uncertainty. The narrator both *is* and *is not* Doc, travelling freely into his head and then wandering far off, describing everything in great detail, leaving the reader to wonder if the story we are getting is filtered through an entirely reliable mind. The narrator never uses its apparent omniscience to bring further clarity to the events, and eventually leaves the reader with a long list of maybe's and what-if's in the last paragraph that seems to finally establish the limits of the narrator's and the reader's certainty.

### ***The Story of Kotikarna***

*The Story of Kotikarna* falls inside the genre of Buddhist literature called *avadana* literature. In the introduction to his translation of the *Divyavadana* Joel Tatelman says that narratives in *avadana* literature “denote a narrative of an individual's religiously significant deeds” that “authenticate[s] local Buddhist traditions and dramatize[s] the importance of moral discipline, karma, religious giving and especially the power of faith and devotion” (Tatelman 2005, 15). The narratives in the *Divyavadana* are carefully-honed devices of meaning-making.

As with *Inherent Vice*, how *The Story of Kotikarna* provides meaning to audiences depends on its employment of constituent events, supplemental events, and narrators.

The story follows the son of a wealthy householder, Srona Kotikarna, who sets off on a mercantile quest in order to maintain his family's economic security. After having travelled far and wide collecting ship-loads of precious jewels, Srona's half-brothers accidentally leave him on the side of the road on one of the last legs of the voyage. When he awakes, he finds the trail home distorted by "a dusty wind", and he promptly loses his locational bearings (Rotman 2008, 46). As he wanders around the foreign land that turns out to be a "terrible realm of existence" populated by ghosts, nymphs, and giant centipedes, he encounters two iron cities full of hungry ghosts, who turn out to be fairly polite and informative (Rotman 2008, 47-70). After he visits the two cities of iron, he comes upon three flying mansions populated by people with mixed bags of karma, all of whom request that he warn their erring children (a son who slaughters sheep, a son who is a brahman adulterer, and a daughter that is a prostitute) away from the debaucherous lifestyles they lead back where Srona is from, lest they end up just like them. After witnessing the repercussions each mansion-dweller earned by disregarding the noble monk Mahakatyayana's advice in their past lives, Srona agrees to warn their similarly-fated children. He is eventually transported back home, where he becomes a monk after having fulfilled the requests of the inhabitants of each flying mansion. Srona is only able to convince the three children that he had indeed communicated with their dead parents by revealing to them the hidden location of gold that only their parents knew about. Seeing the gold, the children believe Srona, and they vow to change their ways by regularly offering alms to Mahakatyayana. After becoming a monk under Mahakatyayana, Srona then meets the Buddha

who expounds on Srona's previous life and the causes that led to his privileged life and his voyage into the "terrible realm of existence".

### **Constituents and Supplements**

*The Story of Kotikarna* is predominantly occupied with constituency: those events or actions – either immediate or buried somewhere in the deep past – that result in the characteristic factors of an individual's life, especially those factors as they relate to the individual's relationship with Buddhist practice.

Through Srona's discoveries and actions, nearly everything in the story specifically illustrates the workings of karma, or that "the result of absolutely evil actions is absolutely evil, the result of absolutely pure actions is absolutely pure, and the result of mixed actions is mixed" (Rotman 2008, 69). Because of the story's detailed representation of the characters' karmic trajectories, the clarity and centrality of the constituent events – the events that move the story forward – are of incredible importance. After all, if the story aims to create believable connections between someone's actions and those actions' consequences, it has to frame the actions with as little ambiguity as possible. Take, for example, the interaction between Srona Kotikarna and his mother, who, emotional over her son's inevitable departure, "speaks [...] inauspicious words" to Srona (Rotman 2008, 44). Srona reacts with anger, and "speaks harshly" back to his mother. She immediately reprimands him with this response: "Son [...] you have committed an act of harsh speech. Confess your sin as sin. Maybe then this bad karma will diminish, give out, and finally be exhausted" (Rotman 2008, 44). Later, the Buddha elucidates with the following statement: "[Srona] committed the act of harsh speech in the presence of his

mother [...] As a result of that action, he witnessed terrible realms of existence in this lifetime” (Rotman 2008, 70). The consistent terminology (“act of harsh speech”, “terrible realms of existence”) nearly guarantees the clear connection between the story’s events, and the understanding of these events as constituent.

In other places, the connections leading one constituent event to another is less direct, though no less essential. Srona’s journey through the “terrible realms of existence” entails him talking to and learning from a variety of individuals who are currently living out the karmic consequences of their past lives. All their punishments are different, and stem from different actions, but each instance of their committal of wrongdoings somehow involves the noble monk Mahakatyayana. Because they ignore Mahakatyayana’s advice, or make some other mistake involving the old monk, they ask Srona to instruct their children to “offer alms to the noble Mahakatyayana” to atone for their misdeeds (Rotman 2008, 58-9). Hearing the repetitive references to Mahakatyayana’s wisdom and his worthiness of alms-reception, and seeing how their mistakes led them to the “terrible realms of existence”, affects Srona. Luckily, he is fortunate enough to be a temporary visitor to the “terrible realms of existence” and thus has the privilege of learning from what he sees.

When he returns home he decides to “go forth as a monk under the noble Mahakatyayana” (Rotman 2008, 60). Despite all the interactions Srona has with the tortured inhabitants of the “realms of terrible existence”, despite all the details he gleans from how certain actions yield certain results, the main element that at first seems to matter to Srona is that these people’s recountings all at one point or another involve the monk Mahakatyayana. It is because of their repetitive mentioning of the noble monk that Srona decides to pursue the

monastic life upon his return home. This decision is without a doubt a constituent event, for it leads to Srona meeting the Buddha. However, the connection between Srona's journey to the "terrible realms of existence" and his taking up as a monk is less clear, though we will see that it is on account of his completion of his promises that he eventually incites Mahakatyayana to take him on as a pupil.

Therefore, the details surrounding the three parents' misdeeds and their children's' current misdeeds are supplementary events; the details can be changed so long as Srona hears about the merits of Mahakatyayana, which is necessary for the story to progress. However, these supplemental details are incredibly instructive examples of how karma works and how people come to believe in the workings of karma – through sight, sound, and physical proofs. The uniform quality of Srona's interactions with the three children of the mansion-dwellers demonstrates how important the detail of sight is to the narrative as a whole: immediately upon seeing the revealed gold, the children believe Srona and also believe in the workings of karma. Andy Rotman emphasizes how in this story "Seeing is the criterion for believability" (Rotman 2009, 32). Although supplemental, these interactions do a great deal of work to communicate Buddhist values, and it is only after this point that Srona is free to become a monk.

Another example of this story's use of supplementary events is the list of questions Mahakatyayana gives Srona to ask the Buddha when he meets him. These questions bring up very specific issues that are apparently arising for the monks in Mahakatyayana's assembly. The topics of these questions are: a shortage of monks and how to assemble a quorum on this account, what kind of footwear is appropriate for monks, whether skins can be used for mats

and rugs, the frequency of one's bathing, and the procedure for attributing blame for undelivered goods (Rotman 2008, 62-3). Besides these questions providing a glimpse into possible monastic questions and issues, the inclusion of them in the story allows for the representation of other monastic norms and customs that, for the people preserving and telling this story, would be details worth passing on.

For instance, when first delivering these questions to the Buddha he does so at the wrong time, and the Buddha tells him so: "Srona, this is not the appropriate time for answering your questions. There will be an assembly of the community. That will be the appropriate time for answering questions" (Rotman 2008, 65). When Srona asks at the correct time, he does so very specifically: "Srona Kotikarna approached the Blessed One, venerated with his head the feet of the Blessed One, and then stood at a respectful distance" (Rotman 2008, 65). These depictions of proper monastic conduct are irrelevant as far as our understanding of constituency goes, but they communicate important details about how monks should pose questions and interact with senior members of the community.

Whether or not events and details in *The Story of Kotikarna* are constituent or supplementary, they all interlock to communicate the workings of the Buddhist karmic system, how to effectively navigate that system, and how to carry oneself as either a layperson or a monk. The constituent events are clear, regular, and consistent, mirroring the karmic system they seek to build faith in. The supplementary events breathe a sense of adventure into the story, theorize on how people come to believe in the karmic system, and set guidelines for monastic and lay behavior. Through the clarity and repetition of the supplementary and constituent events, readers recreate the story's meaning.

### ***The Story of Kotikarna's Narrator***

The narrator of *The Story of Kotikarna* sticks quite close to Srona throughout the entire story, following him from his conception up until the moment the Buddha hijacks the story and narrates Srona's past life. Only briefly does the narrator wander away from Srona in order to discuss the awkward reception of the Srona-less band of merchants by his gullible and grief-stricken parents (Rotman 2008, 45-6). The narrator is able to project Srona's thoughts, but displays very little in terms of *voice*; every description is nearly void of flourishes that betray the narrator's identity or attitude, taking careful steps to put everything a character says or thinks inside quotation marks. The story is delivered concisely and without any interference by the narrator.

However, at the very end of the story the Buddha directly assumes the role of narrator by using his powers of insight to peer into the past and determine the exact causes of Srona's current situation – the fortunate and the unfortunate. He narrates this new story from the past in almost exactly the same voice and style as the previous narrator (although I assume this has more to do with translation than anything else). This final act of narration, delivered by the Buddha himself, strengthens the audience's belief that acting in accordance with Buddhist precepts is the only way to ensure consistent positive outcomes in future lives. The narrative voice that splits itself between an unaffected narrator and the Buddha serves to confirm the assurances the story develops by being concise, clear, and connective.

### **Conclusive Remarks**

Each story's balance of constituent and supplementary events and its use of narrators establishes different degrees of certainty in the way the world works. By displaying a system of causal interactions through repetitive examples, *The Story of Kotikarna* produces confidence in a world where everything is connected and everything can be explained and navigated to great effect by integrating specific behaviors and beliefs into one's life. This is confirmed by the ultimate narrator of the Buddha, who has access to the connective relationships between all things. Srona's journey from merchant to monk represents the journey to faith, culminating in a "meeting" of the Buddha, whose knowledge yokes together events. *The Story of Kotikarna's* employment of clear constituency satisfies readers' expectations for the connection of things in the world, and certain behaviors and beliefs that can be practiced in the lives of audiences are given concrete meaning.

*Inherent Vice* ultimately provides audiences with a healthy dose of skepticism. By representing overwhelming numbers of individuals whose ways of understanding the world range from drug-induced hallucinations to the over-interpretation of television commercials, the novel has a hard time leaning on a dependable set of interpretive criteria. In fact, as we have seen, the novel's inconclusiveness can be seen as an invitation to find the meaning in it that audiences choose. For instance, in the first mentioning of Sortilège, the narrator says, "She was in touch with invisible forces and could diagnose and solve all manner of problems [...] She had never been wrong that Doc knew about" (Pynchon 2009, 11), which, taken literally, implies that the entire Lemurian connection could very much be the truth, and only through the narrator's and Doc's lenses does the novel give us reason to believe otherwise. But this kind of a leap is up to the reader; the novel leaves only gaps and maybe's. Even Doc Sportello – who,

similar to Srona Kotikarna, passes between the seen and unseen worlds – cannot formulate an effective means to communicate the validity of his otherworldly experiences to others. Without the conclusive voice of a supra-narrator like the Buddha, the many possibilities for making meaning out of the story coexist and intertwine. Even Sortilège’s and Vehi’s apparent omniscience leaves us without any reliable conclusiveness. However, all this uncertainty is redeemed by Doc’s confused, skeptical, possibly futile, but determinately genuine role as a resistor of “the ancient forces of greed and fear” in even the smallest of ways (Pynchon 2009, 130).

Earlier in the paper, I quoted Nancy Huston’s equation of human worlds with fictions: narratives make up everything from the deepest unconscious narrators of our minds to the unspoken agreements behind proper social interaction, to the playground bickering of international politics, to what we decide to buy at the grocery store this week. To narrate our lives is a basic truth, and without this, the human world simply would not exist. Sure, the world would *be* here, but it would not resemble the web of connective understandings and stories that it so necessarily is for us as human beings. When confronted with complex narratives constructed by another human mind, or crafted and honed over time by a lineage of human minds, this basic truth of our instinct to assemble narrative coherence and the process that it entails activates and begins orienting the given events into an understandable string, one piece of information lining up after the other like beadwork until we are left with a unified pattern of thoughts, connections, and events. Implicit in this ordering and in the decision to represent things certain ways is the attribution of meaning to things in the world. By piecing together and making sense of a complex narrative as it unfolds through its discourse, we willfully allow

another voice – laden with its own sense of meaning – to splice onto the hardwired process of narrating our lives to ourselves. But instead of hearing the same single narrator – the one that we listen to however consciously or unconsciously throughout the course of our lives, and that we probably refer to as our “true selves” – we get an augmentation of ourselves, however briefly, narrating to us a different world full of its own possibilities, its own particular sense of meaning.

When, as in the case of this paper, we hold two artifacts of the process of narration up side by side and try to line their events up one after another simultaneously, it is not uncommon to find that our internal narrators – who automatically work to make meaning from events – blending the two narratives, relating them, finding coincidences in them that exist despite the space between them. In my experience organizing and writing this paper, the phases of paralysis, brought on by regular considerations of the seemingly irreconcilable distances between *Inherent Vice* and *The Story of Kotikarna*, were alleviated largely by these moments where either story came into focus because of the other. The most significant being the similarities between Doc and Srona as characters having the strange fortune to be able to travel into and out of other realms of existence (for Doc this is the Lemurian space brought on largely by Vehi’s guidance and psychedelic drugs, for Srona it is the realm populated by hungry ghosts and flying mansions brought on by his karma). This similarity is sharpened further by Doc’s and Srona’s eventual divergence – Doc’s lack of a conclusive reason or enough communal support to believe in what he experiences, and Srona’s solidification of belief on behalf of the Buddha’s clarifying wisdom and the structure of the community that surrounds it – and signifies

the human predicament: in a world full of entangled truths, how do we decide what to believe in, and on what are our current beliefs based? Both stories answer these in different ways.

Although these alignments and their products could possibly be understood as some kind of textual synchronicity – an interpretation Sauncho Smilax might prefer – the notion that holding two narratives in mind prompts the story-teller in us to assemble some multilateral coherence between them suggests something much more valuable about the potential of human understanding – that on some level, in some way, all stories relate to one another, and can shed light on our own beliefs and the processes that form them. Reading these two stories next to each other has provided me with an important twofold question: to what degree has the process of modernization incapacitated the integrity of the human community by alienating the individual, and through what process of reconciliation can these wounds be healed?

It is in these almost accidental connections that we can learn the most about our assumptions, our desires, our ways of reading and understanding the world and why it is that we attribute meaning to certain things over others, and finally whether the values and meanings presented by a given narrative are relevant to our lives as connective agents. The similarities between *Inherent Vice's* attribution of value to sometimes miniscule acts of goodness even in the face of an uncompromisingly harsh world, and *The Story of Kotikarna's* attribution of value to the pursuit of purely good actions for the sake of minimizing future evils come about through two very different levels of certainty about the world. By reading, understanding, and finding the creative space between the two, we stand to recreate the kinds of order and disorder either narrative represents.

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