Furthermore, these stereotypes might encompass most or all knowledge a person holds on this topic. Although Hacking argues that today most people have at least *some* understanding of autism ("Humans, Aliens & Autism" 46), their conception might be false or merely stereotypical. If so, a person is prone to overestimating their knowledge in this particular area. In other words, because they lack further knowledge, they cannot critically apprehend their stereotypes, which may even turn out to be prejudiced if false. This, of course, also applies to novels.

Stereotypes in Reading

I assume that literature is more than aesthetics or a cultural by-product, even more than knowledge made accessible to the subject. According to Pierre Legendre, literature is essential to the production and reproduction of our existence (Becker 180), since, as he theorises, it is Lacan's metaphorical mirror in our culture and thus the constitutive momentum for both, the subject and culture itself (174). Consequently, the subject is – at least in parts – institutionalised through literature (173). Unsurprisingly, then, society's understanding of reality is reflected in literature, which happens to include stereotypes. Thus, not only will authors more or less overtly encode stereotypes into their novels, but readers generally rely on their real-world knowledge to decipher fictional characters. Again, stereotypes are not necessarily negative. According to Hochman, we commonly typify people in real life, i.e. we categorise them according to our established (cultural and individual) stereotypes (46–47). By doing so, we do not necessarily strip them of their individuality; rather, we remain aware of them being individuals while also classifying them (122–23), so as to easily make assumptions about them. Although this process sounds condescending, this automatism helps us to quickly predict the actions and reactions of others. As mentioned above, stereotypes are both private and public, thus I will assume that culturally bound stereotypes exist within the collective memory. Hence, it is not surprising that readers also apply stereotypes in the process of understanding a novel (Auracher and Hi-

rose 796). Although one might think of stereotypical characters as trite and boring, portrayals that trigger stereotypes are not necessarily bad. In fact, it might be argued that all characters allude to stereotypes if one considered the latter abbreviated knowledge that is used for classification. Stereotypical portrayals are not necessarily false but tend to be one-sided and exaggerated, i.e. stylised, where some traits are overrepresented, while others are not represented at all. Obviously, negative stereotypes can and will distort the information conveyed. Consequently, portrayals that incorporate these stereotypes or do not actively oppose them, may contribute to the propagation of prejudices. When discussing autism portrayals, any representation fosters awareness. However, stereotypical portrayals that emphasise certain characteristics will shift the public's perception towards a few select characteristics of autism. Thus, even positive but one-sided representation distorts the public perception of autism. Unfortunately, stereotypes can only be overruled by knowledge. If the information given in a novel strongly contradicts a reader's understanding, there is a good chance that they will disregard the text as a 'bad' or 'unrealistic' portrayal. Nevertheless, positive and negative portrayals can change readers' assumptions about autists. Misinformation or stereotypes can only be identified as such if they clash with the reader's previous knowledge or experience. In other words, readers are only able to recognise negative stereotypes in characters, if they have formed positive assumptions about autists. Otherwise, these negative portrayals will shape the reader's conception of autists and thus perpetuate prejudices.

In fiction, stereotyped characters, i.e. characters that mostly or solely allude to the reader's stereotypes, are called *types*. Some of these stereotypical characterisations in literature have become ends in themselves, as the stylistic device of a *stock character*. Types and stock characters are often used interchangeably, and my own differentiation yields rather easily, too. For better understanding, I propose to use 'types' for all kinds of stereotyped characters, and stock characters to emphasise their canonical origin. Thus, all stock characters are literary types but not the other way around.

Phelan defines types as stylised characters with a strong thematic component (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 13). He theorises that

> the link through character to the general cultural codes ought to be considered as an extrapolation of the thematic function proceeding by analogy rather than as an interpretation uncovering the basic codes of the text. (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 78–79)

Because types are in essence personifications of stereotypes, Phelan suggests that a reader does not decipher their traits from the text but makes automated assumptions about them. To quote Lippmann again, we define first and then we see. Thus, the more pronounced the thematic function of a character is, the more likely a reader is to attribute stereotypical traits to the character rather than rely on the information given in the text. Phelan defines thematic dimensions of a character as representative of classes of people, thus essentially stereotypes (see above). According to him, not all dimensions of a character are turned into functions within the course of the story. However, although he only mentions their thematic function when talking about cultural codes, I believe these are interchangeable here. After all, one also makes stereotypical assumptions about names, class, age, or profession, i.e. encompassing thematic dimensions that are not necessarily turned into functions. Consequently, stereotypes can overrule much of the character's dimensions once a reader has 'recognised' (classified) them as a type.

On the other hand, stock characters (per my definition) emerge in literature, drama, or film. For example, the Holmesian detective is not a person readers have met in real life; likely they came in touch with Arthur Conan Doyle's work or a remake thereof. Yet the Holmesian detective is a stock character that a reader can recognise once they are familiar with it because they have memorised a certain combination or pattern of attributes. The character has thus become a literary convention that is held within the collective memory. However, recognisability comes at a cost since the character also loses its individuality. Consequently, the mimetic component is less pronounced. Paradoxically, characters require a certain loss of individuality to become stock characters, because

they first need to achieve a certain level of recognisability. By nature of the cause, the Holmesian detective became a stock character when other authors (or film makers, for that part) modelled characters after the original by Doyle.

While I might categorise people in real life according to (stereo-)types, I am less likely to compare them to stock characters, and if I do so, it is metaphorically speaking, for they do not exist outside of literature.[4] However, the 'evil stepmother' still shares a family resemblance with stepmothers in real life, for the mere reason that the same terminology is used. It would be more precise to refer to the 'evil fictional stepmother', which is a stylised exaggeration of an evil stepmother, but within novels, they are all images on the carrier paper of literature:

> Literature, like psychology and history, can stabilize and articulate such images [of other people] and sustain consciousness of them. It can also make such images enduringly memorable because of the way it crystallizes them, facets them, and embeds them in words. (Hochman 63)

Obviously, differentiating stock characters and types becomes meaningless once they are both considered thematic personifications of stereotypes, but I will stick with the distinction to emphasise the fact that stock characters are canonical literary conventions, and I may only learn about them if I read or watch movies. On the other hand, we all tend to categorise real human beings according to (stereo-)types. I further suggest that personifications of stereotypes in literature are in fact symbolically heightened due to their artistic origin. For one thing, I am more likely to recognise them because of the limited data and the teleological determination. On the other hand, I am also more likely to attribute meaning to these portrayals. For example, a character that is a grumpy old veteran may be associated with stereotypical assumptions about old people, male persons, or former military, but because of the unique combi-

4 Although one may of course argue whether 'types' exist.

nation, it becomes representative of something more (e.g. the memory of war).

In the introduction to this study, I referred to Draaisma's idea of a 'set of stereotypes', which could also be understood as a type. What I have dubbed 'the Autist' would therefore be the quintessential personification of this set. 'The Autist' as a stock character, on the other hand, would require a literary convention.[5] While I cannot rule out the possibility that such a stock character exists, I suggest that it would require an analysis of novels, movies, and tv series across different genres to generate a sample of adequate size. Any findings would then also have to considerably diverge from autists in real life. In other words, the stock character 'the Autist', per my definition, would necessarily incorporate a fictional element that makes it inherently literary while still alluding to autism stereotypes.

Autism Stereotypes

Autism activist Sonya Freeman Loftis explored the negative consequences of autism stereotypes based on the public assumption that Sherlock Holmes is on the spectrum.

> The claim that Conan Doyle's famous detective has Asperger's Syndrome is ubiquitous enough to appear in a variety of popular venues, and his diagnosis has been pursued by both fans and professionals; unfortunately, most of the discussions of Holmes's autistic traits present negative stereotypes as a part of their analysis, offering an extremely superficial and one-sided view of autism. (Loftis)

While I do not agree with this 'diagnosis', it is a prime example of how retrospective interpretation will make it come 'true' and textual evidence

5 Technically, this refers to 'the fictional Autist', so as to emphasise their artificial nature.