THE WITTEN-RESHETIKHIN-TURAEV REPRESENTATION OF THE KAUFFMAN SKEIN ALGEBRA

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ABSTRACT. For a primitive $2N$–root of unity with $N$ odd, the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev topological quantum field theory provides a representation of the Kauffman skein algebra of a closed surface. We show that this representation is irreducible, and we compute its classical shadow, in the sense of [BW12a].

The discovery of the Jones polynomial [Jon87] was quickly followed by two originally unrelated developments. The first one was the introduction of the Kauffman skein module of a 3–manifold by Turaev [Tur88] and Przytycki [Prz91]. A special case leads to the Kauffman skein algebra $S^A(S)$ of a surface $S$, which was later interpreted as a quantization of the character variety $\mathcal{R}_{\text{SL}_2(C)}(S)$, consisting of the characters of all group homomorphisms $\pi_1(S) \to \text{SL}_2(C)$ [Tur91, BFKB99, BFKB02, PS00].

Another development was Witten’s interpretation [Wit89] of the Jones polynomial within the framework of a topological quantum field theory. This topological quantum field theory point of view was formalized in mathematical terms by Reshetikhin-Turaev [RT90, RT91]. In particular, the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev topological quantum field theory leads, for every primitive $2N$–root of unity $A$, to a representation $\rho: S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$ of the skein algebra corresponding to this parameter $A$.

The first result of this article is the following.

Theorem 1. For every primitive $2N$–root of unity $A$, the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation $\rho: S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$ is irreducible.

This result can be compared with Roberts’s proof [Rob01] that, when $N = 2p$ with $p$ prime, the action of the mapping class group of $S$ on the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev space $V_S$ is irreducible. Theorem 1 can actually be deduced from the proofs of [Rob01] in this special case.

Our interest in the irreducibility of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation is motivated by [BW11, BW12a, BW12b, BW13], where we initiated the systematic study of finite-dimensional irreducible representations of the skein algebra $S^A(S)$. In particular, when $A$ is a $2N$–root of unity with $N$ odd, we associate to such an irreducible representation $\rho: S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V)$ an element $r_\rho$ of the character variety $\mathcal{R}_{\text{SL}_2(C)}(S)$. Remembering the

\textit{2010 Mathematics Subject Classification.} 57M27, 57R56.

This research was partially supported by grants DMS-0604866 and DMS-1105692 from the National Science Foundation.

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interpretation of $S^A(S)$ as a quantization of $\mathcal{R}_{SL_2(C)}(S)$ and considering the representation $\rho$ as a quantum point of this quantization, the character $r_{\rho} \in \mathcal{R}_{SL_2(C)}(S)$ is the classical shadow of $\rho$. With irreducibility of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation established, we thus may inquire about the classical shadow of the best known representation of the skein algebra.

The Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev topological quantum field theory, and the associated representation of $S^A(S)$, have slightly different features according to whether $N$ is even or odd, respectively known as the $SU_2$ and $SO_3$ cases. The classical shadow of a representation is defined only when $N$ is odd.

**Theorem 2.** When $A$ is a primitive $2N$–root of unity with $N$ odd, the classical shadow of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation $\rho: S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$ is the trivial character $\iota \in \mathcal{R}_{SL_2(C)}(S)$, represented by the trivial homomorphism $\pi_1(S) \to \text{SL}_2(C)$.

The proof of Theorem 2 is relatively simple, although it is rooted in much deeper facts involving the two types of Chebyshev polynomials. The Chebyshev polynomial of the first type, $T_N(x)$, appears in a critical way when defining the classical shadow of a representation of $S^A(S)$. On the other hand, the second type of Chebyshev polynomials, $S_n(x)$, is well known to play an important role in the representation theory of the quantum group $U_q(sl_2)$ and in the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev topological quantum field theory. We are ultimately led to Theorem 2 by exploiting these relationships and making use of some elementary relations between the two types.

In [BW13] we construct, for every character $r \in \mathcal{R}_{SL_2(C)}(S)$, an irreducible representation $\rho: S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$ whose classical shadow $r_{\rho}$ is equal to $r$. In particular, this associates another irreducible representation $\rho_\iota$ to the trivial character $\iota$. The construction of [BW13] is unfortunately not very explicit in the special case of the trivial character $\iota$; however, it appears that the representation that it provides has very different features from those of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation.

1. **The Kauffman skein module**

The *Kauffman skein module* $S^A(M)$ of an oriented 3–dimensional manifold $M$ depends on a parameter $A = e^{\pi i} \in \mathbb{C} - \{0\}$, and is defined as follows: one first considers the vector space freely generated by all isotopy classes of framed links in the thickened surface $S \times [0, 1]$, and then one takes the quotient of this space by the skein relation that

$$[K_1] = A^{-1}[K_0] + A[K_\infty]$$

whenever the three links $K_1$, $K_0$ and $K_\infty \subset S \times [0, 1]$ differ only in a little ball where they are as represented on Figure 1.

In the special case where $M = S \times [0, 1]$, we write $S^A(S) = S^A(S \times [0, 1])$ and we note that this module now comes with a natural multiplication. Indeed, if $[K], [L] \in S^A(S)$ are respectively represented by the framed links $K, L$, we can consider their superposition

$$[K] \cdot [L] = [K_1 \cup L_2] \in S^A(S)$$
Figure 1. A Kauffman triple

represented by the union of the framed link $K_1 \subset S \times [0, \frac{1}{2}]$ obtained by rescaling $K \subset S \times [0, 1]$ and of the framed link $L_2 \subset S \times [\frac{1}{2}, 1]$ obtained by rescaling $L \subset S \times [0, 1]$. This endows the skein module $S^A(S)$ with the structure of an algebra, called the Kauffman skein algebra of the oriented surface $S$.

2. The Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev topological quantum field theory

We briefly review a few fundamental properties of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev topological quantum field theory, and refer to [BHMV92, BHMV95, Lic93, Lic97, Lic02, Tur94] for details and proofs.

The Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev topological quantum field theory $Z^A_{\text{WRT}}$ depends on the choice of a primitive $2N$–root of unity $A$, and is defined over the category $\mathcal{C}$ defined as follows: the objects of $\mathcal{C}$ are closed oriented surfaces $S$; the morphisms from $S_1$ to $S_2$ are pairs $(M, L)$ where $M$ is a compact oriented 3–manifold with $\partial M = (-S_1) \sqcup S_2$, where $L$ is a framed link in the interior of $M$, and where $M$ is endowed with a $p_1$–structure. The precise definition of a $p_1$–structure can be found in [BHMV95, App. B] but, for the purpose of the current article, it suffices to know that it captures some certain homotopic information on the tangent bundle of the manifolds considered.

In particular, $Z^A_{\text{WRT}}$ associates a finite-dimensional vector space $V_S = Z^A_{\text{WRT}}(S)$ to each closed oriented surface $S$, and a linear map $Z^A_{\text{WRT}}(M, L): V_{S_1} \rightarrow V_{S_2}$ to each morphism $(M, L)$ as above. In addition, the vector space $V_\emptyset$ associated to the empty surface $\emptyset$ comes equipped with a canonical identification with $\mathbb{C}$; in other words, this vector space is 1–dimensional and contains a preferred basis element that we will denote by $1$.

The topological quantum field theory $Z^A_{\text{WRT}}$ satisfies many more properties, in particular those that characterize topological quantum field theories. Most of these features will play no direct rôle in the current article. However the following fact, which is grounded in properties of the quantum group $U_q(\mathfrak{sl}_2)$ underlying the construction of $Z^A_{\text{WRT}}$, is crucial for our purposes.

Lemma 3. The linear maps $Z^A_{\text{WRT}}(M, L)$ associated to the morphisms of the category $\mathcal{C}$ satisfy the skein relation that, as linear maps $V_{S_1} \rightarrow V_{S_2}$,

$$Z^A_{\text{WRT}}(M, L_1) = A^{-1}Z^A_{\text{WRT}}(M, L_0) + AZ^A_{\text{WRT}}(M, L_\infty)$$

whenever the framed links $L_1$, $L_0$ and $L_\infty$ form a Kauffman triple in the manifold $M$ with $\partial M = (-S_1) \sqcup S_2$, for a fixed $p_1$–structure on $M$. □
A first consequence of Lemma 3 is that the skein algebra $S^A(S)$ acts on the space $V_S$, by consideration of the special case $M = S \times [0, 1]$. Indeed, for any framed link $L \subset S \times [0, 1]$, the pair $(S \times [0, 1], L)$ can be seen as a morphism from $S$ to $S$, and therefore induces a linear map $Z_{WRT}^A(S \times [0, 1], L) : V_S \to V_S$.

**Lemma 4.** There exists a unique algebra homomorphism
\[
\rho : S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)
\]
such that, for every framed link $L$ in $S \times [0, 1]$,
\[
\rho([L]) = Z_{WRT}^A(S \times [0, 1], L)
\]
when $S \times [0, 1]$ is endowed with the product $p_1$–structure.

**Proof.** Lemma 3 shows that the rule $L \mapsto Z_{WRT}^A(S \times [0, 1], L)$ is compatible with the skein relation, and therefore induces a linear map $\rho : S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$. The multiplication law of $S^A(S)$ is defined by the superposition operation, which itself corresponds to the composition of morphisms $(S \times [0, 1], L)$ in the category $\mathcal{C}$. It follows that $\rho$ is an algebra homomorphism. \qed

This homomorphism $\rho : S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$ is the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation of the skein algebra $S^A(S)$.

Another application of Lemma 3 will enable us to perform computations in the space $V_S$.

Consider a 3–manifold $M$ with boundary $\partial M = S$, endowed with a $p_1$–structure. A framed link $L \subset M$ provides a morphism $(M, L)$ from the empty surface $\emptyset$ to $S$. This provides a linear map $Z_{WRT}^A(M, L)$ from $V_\emptyset = \mathbb{C}$ to $V_S$, and in particular specifies an element $Z_{WRT}^A(M, L)(1) \in V_S$. As above, Lemma 3 shows that the map $L \mapsto Z_{WRT}^A(M, L)(1)$ defines a linear map $\Phi_M : S^A(M) \to V_S$, from the skein module of $M$ to the space $V_S$.

**Lemma 5.** If $M$ is a 3–manifold with boundary $\partial M = S$, the linear map $\Phi_M : S^A(M) \to V_S$ with $\Phi_M(L) = Z_{WRT}^A(M, L)(1)$ is surjective. \qed

We will use Lemma 5 in the special case where $M$ is a handlebody $H$. Choose an identification $H \cong \Sigma \times [0, 1]$ of this handlebody with the product of the interval with a compact oriented surface $\Sigma$ with boundary. Select also a trivalent spine for $\Sigma$, namely a trivalent graph $\Gamma$ embedded in the interior of $\Sigma$ such that $\Sigma$ deformation retracts to $\Gamma$. We will use this data to describe a basis for $V_S$.

An $N$–admissible weight system assigns to each edge $e$ of $\Gamma$ a non-negative integer weight $w(e)$ such that the following conditions hold:

1. at every vertex of $\Gamma$, the weights of the edges $e_1, e_2, e_3$ adjacent to this vertex satisfy the triangle inequalities $w(e_1) \leq w(e_2) + w(e_3)$, $w(e_2) \leq w(e_1) + w(e_3)$ and $w(e_3) \leq w(e_1) + w(e_2)$;
2. if $N$ is odd, the weight $w(e)$ of each edge $e$ is even and bounded by $N - 2$; in addition, at each vertex, the sum of the weights of the adjacent edges is bounded by $2N - 4$;
3. if $N$ is even, the weight $w(e)$ of each edge $e$ is bounded by $\frac{N}{2} - 2$; in addition, at each vertex, the sum of the weights of the adjacent edges is bounded by $N - 4$.
Let $\mathcal{W}_\Gamma$ denote the (finite) set of all $N$–admissible weight systems for $\Gamma$.

An $N$–admissible edge weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$ specifies an element $\beta_w$ of the skein module $S^A(H)$, by replacing each edge $e$ of $\Gamma$ weighted by $w(e) \leq N - 2$ by a copy of the $w(e)$–th Jones-Wenzl idempotent, represented by a box $\[w(e)\]$. The precise definition of the element $\beta_w \in S^A(H)$ associated to the weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$ can be found for instance in [Lic97] or [Tur94], but we can give a flavor of the construction. For $a \geq 0$ such that $A^{4a'} \neq 1$ for every $a'$ with $0 < a' < a$ (namely, for $0 \leq a < N$ is $N$ is odd, and for $0 \leq a < \frac{N}{2}$ if $N$ is even), the Jones-Wenzl idempotent $\[a\]$ is a certain formal linear combination of families of disjoint arcs, each with $a$ strands emanating from each end of the box lying on $\Sigma$. For instance,

$$4 = \frac{A^4}{A^2 + A^{-2}} + \frac{A^4 + 1}{A^2 + A^{-2}} + \frac{A^4 + A^2}{A^2 + A^{-2}} + \frac{A^4 + A^2 + 1}{A^2 + A^{-2}} + \frac{A^4 + A^2 + A^{-2}}{A^2 + A^{-2}} + \frac{A^4 + A^2 + A^{-2} + 1}{A^2 + A^{-2}} + \frac{A^4 + A^2 + A^{-2} + A^{-6}}{A^2 + A^{-2} + A^{-6}} + \frac{A^4 + A^2 + A^{-2} + A^{-6} + A^{-1}}{A^2 + A^{-2} + A^{-6} + A^{-1}} + \frac{A^4 + A^2 + A^{-2} + A^{-6} + A^{-1} + A^{-2}}{A^2 + A^{-2} + A^{-6} + A^{-1} + A^{-2}} + \frac{A^4 + A^2 + A^{-2} + A^{-6} + A^{-1} + A^{-2} + A^{-4}}{A^2 + A^{-2} + A^{-6} + A^{-1} + A^{-2} + A^{-4}}$$

These strands are then connected by disjoint arcs near the vertices of $\Gamma$, using the fact that at each vertex the $w(e)$ are even and add up to an even number. See Figure 2 where $w(e_1) = 6$, $w(e_2) = 4$ and $w(e_3) = 4$.

![Figure 2](image)

For an $N$–admissible weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$, let $\beta_w \in S^A(H)$ be associated to $w$ as above, and let $b_w \in V_S$ be the image of $\beta_w$ under the map $\Phi_H: S^A(H) \to V_S$ of Lemma 5.

**Lemma 6.** The subset $\mathcal{B}_\Gamma = \{b_w\}_{w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma}$ is a basis for the vector space $V_S$. □

The weight system space $\mathcal{W}_\Gamma$ contains a special element $0$, assigning weight 0 to each edge of $\Gamma$. This provides a preferred element $b_0 \in V_S$, represented by the empty skein $[\emptyset] \in S^A(H)$. By definition, $b_0$ is the *vacuum element* of $V_S$. 
3. The Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation is irreducible

Consider the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation $\rho: S^4(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$ of Lemma 4.

**Theorem 7.** The Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation $\rho: S^4(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$ is irreducible.

**Proof.** We will split the proof into several steps. Let $W \subset V_S$ be a non-trivial linear subspace that is invariant under the image $\rho(S^4(S))$. We want to show that $W$ is equal to the whole space $V_S$. For this, we will use a handlebody $H \cong \Sigma \times [0, 1]$ bounding the surface $S$, a trivalent spine $\Gamma$ for the surface $\Sigma$, and the basis $B_{\Gamma} = \{b_{w}\}_{w \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma}}$ of Lemma 6.

By hypothesis, $W$ is non-trivial, and therefore contains a non-trivial element $\sum_{w \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma}} \alpha_w b_w$ with $\alpha_w \in \mathbb{C}$. Our first step is borrowed from [Rob01] and [Rob94].

**Lemma 8.** Let $\Gamma$ be a trivalent spine for the surface $\Sigma$. If $\sum_{w \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma}} \alpha_w b_w$ is in the invariant subspace $W$, then every basis element $b_w \in B_{\Gamma}$ with non-zero coefficient $\alpha_w \neq 0$ also belongs to $W$.

**Proof of Lemma 8.** For every edge $e$ of $\Gamma$, there exists a disk $D_e \subset H$ such that $D_e \cap \partial H$ is equal to the boundary $\partial D_e$, and such that $D \cap \Gamma = D \cap e$ consists of a single point; this is an immediate consequence of the fact that the handlebody $H$ deformation retracts to the graph $\Gamma$. Then, for every basis element $b_w \in B_{\Gamma}$ associated to the weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma}$, a computation as in [Lic97, Lemma 14.2] shows that

$$\rho([\partial D_e])(b_w) = -(A^{2(w(e)+1)} + A^{-2(w(e)+1)})b_w.$$  

As $A$ is a primitive $2N$-root of unity, the numbers $A^{2(i+1)} + A^{-2(i+1)}$ are non-zero and distinct as $i$ ranges over all admissible $i$, that is, over all $i \in \{0, 2, 4, \ldots, N - 3\}$ when $N$ is odd and over all $i \in \{0, 1, 2, \ldots, \frac{N}{2} - 2\}$ when $N$ is even.

After these observations, the lemma is just a matter of elementary linear algebra. Consider an element $v = \sum_{w \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma}} \alpha_w b_w$ of $W$ such that $\alpha_{w_1} \neq 0$.

If all the other coefficients $\alpha_w$ where $w \neq w_1$ are equal to 0, then $b_{w_1} = \frac{1}{\alpha_{w_1}} v \in W$ and we are done.

Otherwise, there exists another weight system $w_2 \neq w_1$ with $\alpha_{w_2} \neq 0$. The fact that $w_2 \neq w_1$ in $\mathcal{W}_{\Gamma}$ means that there exists an edge $e$ of $\Gamma$ such that $w_2(e) \neq w_1(e)$. Then the invariant subspace $W$ also contains the element

$$v' = \left(A^{2(w_2(e)+1)} + A^{-2(w_2(e)+1)}\right)v + \rho([\partial D_e])(v)$$

$$= \sum_{w \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma}} \left(A^{2(w_2(e)+1)} + A^{-2(w_2(e)+1)} - A^{2(w(e)+1)} + A^{-2(w(e)+1)}\right)\alpha_w b_w.$$

Note that, in the basis $B_{\Gamma} = \{b_{w}\}_{w \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma}}$, the coordinate of $v'$ corresponding to $b_{w_1}$ is still non-zero since $w_2(e) \neq w_1(e)$, but that $v'$ now has one fewer non-zero coordinate than $v$ (because the coordinate of $v'$ corresponding to $b_{w_2}$ is equal to 0). We can therefore replace $v$ by $v' \in W$, which is simpler.
Iterating this construction, we eventually reach an element of $W$ that has exactly one non-zero coordinate, corresponding to $b_{w_1}$. This proves that $b_{w_1}$ belongs to $W$, as required. $\square$

We will need to extend Lemma 8 to a slightly more general framework. Let a partial spine for the surface $\Sigma$ be the union $\Gamma$ of a finite family of disjoint trivalent graphs and simple closed curves in $\Sigma$, such that each component of $\Sigma - \Gamma$ contains at least one component of the boundary $\partial \Sigma$. This condition guarantees that $\Gamma$ can be enlarged to a trivalent spine $\hat{\Gamma}$ for $\Sigma$, by adding a few vertices and edges.

The notion of an $N$–admissible weight system straightforwardly extends to partial spines: such a weight system consists of an $N$–admissible edge weight system on each trivalent graph component of $\Gamma$; and it assigns to each closed curve component $C$ of $\Gamma$ an even weight $w(C) \in \{0, 2, 4, \ldots, N - 3\}$ if $N$ is odd, or a weight $w(C) \in \{0, 1, 2, \ldots, \frac{N}{2} - 2\}$ if $N$ is even. Again, plugging Jones-Wenzl idempotents into the edges and closed curve components of $\Gamma$ associates an element $\hat{\beta}_w \in S^A(H)$ to each $N$–admissible weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$. As before, we denote by $b_w = \Phi_H(\beta_w) \in V_S$ the image of $\beta_w$ under the map $\Phi_H : S^A(H) \to V_S$ of Lemma 5, and we define $\mathcal{B}_\Gamma = \{b_w\}_{w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma}$. The only major difference is that $\mathcal{B}_\Gamma$ does not necessarily generate the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev space $V_S$ any more.

**Lemma 9.** The statement of Lemma 8 also holds when $\Gamma$ is only a partial spine for $\Sigma$. Namely, if $\Gamma$ is a partial spine for $\Sigma$ and if $\sum_{w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma} \alpha_w b_w$ belongs to the invariant subspace $W$, then every element $b_w \in \mathcal{B}_\Gamma$ with non-zero coefficient $\alpha_w \neq 0$ also belongs to $W$.

**Proof.** Enlarge the partial spine $\Gamma$ to a trivalent spine $\hat{\Gamma}$ for $\Sigma$, by adding vertices inside of the edges and closed curve components of $\Gamma$ and then adding edges connecting these new vertices as necessary. A weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$ determines an $N$–admissible edge weight system for $\hat{\Gamma}$ as follows: it assigns to each edge of $\hat{\Gamma}$ that is contained in $\Gamma$ the $w$–weight of the edge or closed curve component of $\Gamma$ that contains it; and it assigns weight 0 to each of the new edges of $\hat{\Gamma} - \Gamma$. This defines an inclusion $\mathcal{W}_\Gamma \subset \mathcal{W}_{\hat{\Gamma}}$, and we will use the same letter $w$ to denote the original $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$ and the edge weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_{\hat{\Gamma}}$ for $\hat{\Gamma}$ that it defines.

We saw that a weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$ for $\Gamma$ determines an element $\beta_w \in S^A(H)$. Similarly, weighing the edges of $\hat{\Gamma}$ with $w \in \mathcal{W}_{\hat{\Gamma}}$ defines another element $\hat{\beta}_w \in S^A(H)$. It turns out that $\hat{\beta}_w = \beta_w$. Indeed, this immediately follows from the idempotent property $\hat{a} \hat{a} = a$ of Jones-Wenzl idempotents, which shows that adding vertices inside of the edges and closed curve components of $\Gamma$ does not change the associated element of $S^A(H)$; it is immediate that adding weight 0 edges also has no impact. As a consequence, the inclusion $\mathcal{W}_\Gamma \subset \mathcal{W}_{\hat{\Gamma}}$ induces an inclusion $\mathcal{B}_\Gamma \subset \mathcal{B}_{\hat{\Gamma}} \subset V_S$.

With this observation, every element $\sum_{w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma} \alpha_w b_w \in V_S$ can also be written as $\sum_{w \in \mathcal{W}_{\hat{\Gamma}}} \hat{\alpha}_w \hat{b}_w$, by setting $\hat{\alpha}_w = \alpha_w$ when $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma \subset \mathcal{W}_{\hat{\Gamma}}$ and $\hat{\alpha}_w = 0$ when $w \in \mathcal{W}_{\hat{\Gamma}} - \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$. Lemma 9 then immediately follows by applying Lemma 8 to the trivalent spine $\hat{\Gamma}$. $\square$

Lemma 8 shows that the invariant subspace $W$ contains at least one element $b_w \in \mathcal{B}_\Gamma$ associated to a weight system $w \in \mathcal{W}_\Gamma$ for a trivalent spine $\Gamma$. Our next goal is to show that
$W$ contains the vacuum element $b_0$ corresponding to the zero weight system $0 \in W_{\Gamma}$ for all partial spines $\Gamma$. The following definition is designed to measure progress in this direction.

The complexity of a weight system $w \in W_{\Gamma}$ for a partial spine $\Gamma$ is defined as the triple $|w| = (e(\Gamma), \max(w), n_{\max}(w)) \in \mathbb{N}^3$ where $e(\Gamma)$ is the number of edges of $\Gamma$, $\max(w)$ is the largest weight assigned by $w$ to the edges and closed curve components of $\Gamma$, and where $n_{\max}(w)$ is the number of edges and closed curve components where this maximum is attained (and where $\mathbb{N}$ denotes the set of non-negative integers). We endow $\mathbb{N}^3$ with the lexicographic order.

**Lemma 10.** If the invariant subspace $W$ contains an element $b_w \in B_{\Gamma}$ associated to a non-zero weight system $w \in W_{\Gamma}$ for a partial spine $\Gamma$, then $W$ contains another element $b_w' \in B_{\Gamma'}$, represented by a partial spine $\Gamma'$ and a weight system $w' \in W_{\Gamma'}$, such that $|w'| < |w|$.

**Proof.** We distinguish cases.

**Case 1:** The weight system $w$ assigns weight 0 to an edge $e$ of $\Gamma$. The admissibility properties of $e$ implies that the endpoints of $e$ are distinct and that, at each of these endpoints, the two other adjacent edges have the same $w$–weight. Let $\Gamma'$ be the partial spine obtained from $\Gamma$ by removing $e$, and combining the edges that meet at each of its end vertices. By the above observation, $w$ induces a weight system $w' \in W_{\Gamma'}$, and as in the proof of Lemma 9 they are represented by the same basis element in $V_S$. By construction, $\Gamma'$ has one fewer edge than $\Gamma$, so that $|w'| < |w|$.

![Figure 3. The Flip Relation](image)

**Case 2:** No edge weight is 0, and the maximum weight $\max(w)$ is attained on an edge $e_0$ of $\Gamma$ whose endpoints are distinct.

We apply to $\Gamma$ the classical Flip Relation represented in Figure 3. The Flip Move replaces $\Gamma$ by a new partial spine $\Gamma'$ that differs from $\Gamma$ only in the edge $e_0$, and replaces $e_0$ by an edge $e_0'$ that connects differently the four edges meeting $e_0$. The Flip Relation

$$\beta_w = \sum_{w'} \left\{ \begin{array}{ccc} w(e_1) & w(e_2) & w'(e_0') \\ w(e_3) & w(e_4) & w(e_0) \end{array} \right\} \beta_{w'}$$

expresses the element $\beta_w \in S^A(H)$ represented by $w \in W_{\Gamma}$ as a linear combination of elements $\beta_{w'} \in S^A(H)$ where $w'$ ranges over all $\mathbb{N}$–admissible weight systems for $\Gamma'$ that coincide with $w$ over all edges that are common to $\Gamma$ and $\Gamma'$. 
A key feature of this relation are the coefficients \( \left\{ \frac{w(e_1)}{w(e_3)}, \frac{w(e_2)}{w(e_4)}, \frac{w'(e'_0)}{w(e_0)} \right\} \in \mathbb{C} \), known as \( 6j \)-symbols. A precise computation of these \( 6j \)-symbols can be found in \cite{MV94}. The corresponding formula is usually complicated, and expresses a \( 6j \)-symbol as a sum of several terms, each of which is a product of quantum integers and their inverses. However, it is somewhat simpler for the “smallest” of the \( N \)-admissible weight systems \( w' \) that are compatible with \( w \).

Consider the weight system \( w'_1 \) that coincides with \( w \) on \( \Gamma - e_0 = \Gamma' - e'_0 \) and assigns weight

\[
\frac{w'_1(e'_0)}{w(e_0)} = \max \left\{ |w(e_1) - w(e_4)|, |w(e_2) - w(e_3)| \right\}
\]

to the edge \( e'_0 \). The formula is specially designed so that \( w'_1 \) is \( N \)-admissible. In fact, \( w'_1 \) is the edge weight that minimizes the weight \( w'(e'_0) \) among all \( N \)-admissible weight systems \( w' \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma'} \) that coincide with \( w \) outside of \( e'_0 \). We will not need this minimizing property, but the following other feature of \( w' \) is critical for our purposes: for this specific weight system \( w'_1 \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma'} \), the sum occurring in the formula of \cite{MV94} consists of a single term, and expresses the \( 6j \)-symbol \( \left\{ \frac{w(e_1)}{w(e_3)}, \frac{w(e_2)}{w(e_4)}, \frac{w'(e'_0)}{w(e_0)} \right\} \) as a product of non-zero quantum integers and their inverses. In particular, this \( 6j \)-symbol is different from 0.

Remembering that \( b_w = \Phi_H(\beta_w) \in \mathcal{B}_\Gamma \) and \( b_{w'} = \Phi_H(\beta_{w'}) \in \mathcal{B}_{\Gamma'} \) for the map \( \Phi : S^4(H) \to V_S \) of Lemma 9,

\[
b_w = \sum_{w'} \left\{ \frac{w(e_1)}{w(e_3)}, \frac{w(e_2)}{w(e_4)}, \frac{w'(e'_0)}{w(e_0)} \right\} b_{w'}
\]
in the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev space \( V_S \). By hypothesis, \( b_w \) belongs to the invariant subspace \( W \subset V_S \). Lemma 9 then shows that \( W \) also contains the element \( b_{w'_1} \in \mathcal{B}_{\Gamma'} \) corresponding to \( w'_1 \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma'} \), since its coefficient in the above sum is different from 0.

By our hypothesis that the weights assigned by \( w \) to the edges of \( \Gamma \) are non-zero and bounded by \( w(e_0) = \max(w) \), the weight \( w'_1(e'_0) \) defined above is strictly less than \( \max(w) \).

It follows that \( w'_1 \) has lower complexity \( |w'_1| < |w| \) than \( w \).

**Case 3:** No edge weight is 0, and the maximum weight \( \max(w) \) is attained on an edge \( e_0 \) of \( \Gamma \) whose endpoints are identified.

Because the endpoints of \( e_0 \) are identified, we cannot apply a Flip Move at \( e_0 \). Instead, we will apply such a move at the remaining edge \( e_1 \) that is adjacent to the vertex corresponding to the two ends of \( e_0 \). This gives a new partial spine \( \Gamma' \), obtained from \( \Gamma \) by replacing the edge \( e_1 \) by an edge \( e'_1 \) as in Figure 4.

We then consider for \( \Gamma' \) the \( N \)-admissible weight system \( w'_1 \) that assigns weight

\[
\frac{w'_1(e'_1)}{w(e_0)} = \max \left\{ w(e_0) - w(e_2), w(e_0) - w(e_3) \right\}
\]
to the edge \( e'_1 \) and coincides with \( w \) outside of \( e'_1 \). As in Case 2, the formula of \cite{MV94} shows that the \( 6j \)-symbol occurring as coefficient of \( \beta_{w'_1} \) in the Flip Relation of Figure 4 is non-zero. An application of Lemma 9 again proves that the invariant subspace \( W \subset V_S \) contains the element \( b_{w'_1} \in \mathcal{B}_{\Gamma'} \), associated to \( w'_1 \in \mathcal{W}_{\Gamma'} \).
Note that $w'_1(e'_1) < w(e_0) = \max(w)$, so that $|w'_1| \leq |w|$. Because the inequality is not necessarily strict, we are not quite done yet. However, we can now apply a Flip Move to $\Gamma'$ at the edge $e_0$, and use Case 2 to conclude.

**Case 4:** $N$ is odd, and the maximum weight $\max(w)$ is attained on a closed curve component $C$ of $\Gamma$.

Push this simple closed curve $C \subset \Sigma$ to $\Sigma \times \{1\} \subset \partial H = S$ to consider it as a partial spine in a thickening of $S$, and let $[C^{S_2}] \in S^A(S)$ be defined by assigning weight 2 to this partial spine, namely by plugging a Jones-Wenzl idempotent $2$ in $C$; see Remark 11 to explain the notation.

$$= \sum_{w'} \begin{cases} w(e_2) & w(e'_1) \\ w(e_0) & w(e_0) & w(e_1) \end{cases}$$

**Figure 4. A special case of the Flip Relation**

If the subspace $W \subset V_S$ contains $b_w \in \mathcal{B}_\Gamma$, it also contains $\rho([C^{S_2}](b_w)$ by invariance of $W$ under the action of $\rho(S^A(S)) \subset \text{End}(V_S)$. The relation of Figure 5 is valid in a solid torus neighborhood of $C$, enables us to compute this element and gives

$$\rho([C^{S_2}](b_w) = b_w' + b_w + b_w''$$

where the weight systems $w'$ and $w''$ for $\Gamma$ coincide with $w$ outside of the closed curve component $C$, and respectively assign weight $w(C) - 2$ and $w(C) + 2$ to $C$. See [Lic97, Lemma 14.11] for a proof of this relation.

There is a little caveat needed here when $w(C)$ is equal to its maximum possible value $N - 3$. Then, $w''$ assigns weight $N - 1$ to $C$, and consequently is not $N$–admissible any more. The associated element $\beta_{w''} \in S^A(H)$ still makes sense, but its image $\Phi_H(\beta_{w''}) \in V_S$ under the map of Lemma 5 is equal to 0. We consequently set $b_{w''} = 0$ in this case.

In all cases, we can apply Lemma 9 to $\rho([C^{S_2}](b_w) \in W$, and we conclude that $b_w'$ belongs to $W$. By construction, $w'(C) < w(C) = \max(w)$, so that $w' \in W$, has lower complexity $|w'| < |w|$. This concludes the proof in this case.

**Case 5:** $N$ is even, and the maximum weight $\max(w)$ is attained on a closed curve component $C$ of $\Gamma$. 
The proof is almost identical to that of Case 4, except that we do not have to worry about keeping all weights even. Because of this, it suffices to consider the action of the element $[C] \in S^A(S)$ represented by the closed curve $C$. Then, a computation similar to that of Figure 5 (see again [Lic97, Lemma 14.11]) gives that

$$\rho([C])(b_w) = b_w + b_w' + b_w''$$

where the weight systems $w'$ and $w''$ for $\Gamma$ coincide with $w$ outside of the closed curve component $C$, and respectively assign weight $w(C) - 1$ and $w(C) + 1$ to $C$ (with $b_w'' = 0$ when $w(C) = \frac{N}{2} - 2$). An application of Lemma 9 then shows that $W$ contains the basis element $b_w \in \mathcal{B}_\Gamma$. Again, $w' \in W_\gamma$ has lower complexity $|w'| < |w|$, and this concludes the proof in this case.

Since the five cases considered exhaust all possibilities, the proof of Lemma 10 is now complete.

We are now almost done with the proof of Theorem 7. Recursively applying Lemma 10, we eventually reach a partial spine $\Gamma'$ such that the invariant subspace $W$ contains the element $b_0 \in \mathcal{B}_{\Gamma'}$. By definition $b_0$ is also the image of the empty skein $[\emptyset] \in S^A(H)$ under the map $\Phi_H$ of Lemma 5.

Let $K$ be a framed link in the handlebody $H$. Push $K$ into a tubular neighborhood of the boundary $\partial H = S$, so that $K$ defines a skein $[K] \in S^A(S)$.

By invariance of $W$ under the under the action of $\rho(S^A(S)) \subseteq \text{End}(V_S)$, it contains the element $\rho([K])(b_0)$. However, we also have, from the definition of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev homomorphism $\rho$, that

$$\rho([K])(b_0) = \rho([K])(\Phi_H([\emptyset])) = \Phi_H([K \cup \emptyset]) = \Phi_H([K])$$

where, in the first two terms, $[K]$ denotes the element of $S^A(S)$ represented by $K$, whereas $[K]$ is the element of $S^A(H)$ represented by $K$ in the last two terms.

This proves that the invariant subspace $W \subseteq V_S$ contains the image $\Phi_H([K])$ of every skein $[K] \in S^A(H)$. Since these skeins generate $S^A(H)$ and since $\Phi_H: S^A(H) \rightarrow V_S$ is surjective by Lemma 5, this proves that $W$ is equal to the whole space $V_S$.

This completes the proof of Theorem 7.

4. The classical shadow of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation

4.1. Threading polynomials along a framed link. Given a framed knot $K$ in a 3-dimensional manifold $M$ and a polynomial $P(x) = \sum_{i=0}^n a_i x^i$, we can consider the linear combination

$$[K^P] = \sum_{i=1}^n a_i [K^{(i)}] \in S^A(M)$$

where, for each $i$, $K^{(i)}$ is the framed link obtained by taking $i$ parallel copies of $K$ in the direction indicated by the framing. More generally, if $K \subseteq M$ is a framed link with
components \(K_1, K_2, \ldots, K_l\), define
\[
[K^P] = \sum_{1 \leq i_1, i_2, \ldots, i_l \leq n} a_{i_1} a_{i_2} \ldots a_{i_l} [K_1^{(i_1)} \cup K_2^{(i_2)} \cup \cdots \cup K_l^{(i_l)}] \in S^A(M).
\]
By definition, \([K^P] \in S^A(M)\) is obtained by threading the polynomial \(P\) along the framed link \(K\).

We will apply this construction to the (normalized) Chebyshev polynomials of the first and second type.

The \(n\)-th Chebyshev polynomial of the first type \(T_n(x)\) is defined by the properties that \(T_n(x) = xT_{n-1}(x) - T_{n-2}(x)\), \(T_0(x) = 2\) and \(T_1(x) = x\). The \(n\)-th Chebyshev polynomial of the second type \(S_n(x)\) is defined by the same recurrence relation \(S_n(x) = xS_{n-1}(x) - S_{n-2}(x)\), the same initial condition \(S_1(x) = x\), but differs in the other initial condition \(S_0(x) = 1\). The two types of Chebyshev polynomials are related by the property that \(T_n = S_n - S_{n-2}\) for every \(n\).

**Remark 11.** The Chebyshev polynomials of the second type \(S_n(x)\) are ubiquitous in the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev theory and, more generally, in the representation theory of the quantum group \(U_q(\mathfrak{sl}_2)\). In particular, for each framed link \(K\) in a 3–manifold \(M\), the element of \(S^A(M)\) obtained by plugging the \(n\)-th Jones-Wenzl idempotent in each component of \(K\) is equal to the skein \([K^{S_n}] \in S^A(M)\). See [Lic97] §13 or [Lic02, p. 715].

The following facts, which can for instance be found in Lemma 6.3 of [BHMOV92], are crucial for our computations.

**Lemma 12.** Suppose that \(A\) is a primitive \(2N\)-root of unity with \(N\) odd, and let \(V_S\) be the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev space of the surface \(S\). Let \(K\) and \(L\) be two disjoint framed links in a 3–manifold \(M\) bounded by \(S\). Then, for the homomorphism \(\Phi_M : S^A(M) \to V_S\) of Lemma 5,

\[
(1) \quad \Phi_M ([K^{S_{n-1}} \cup L]) = 0;
(2) \quad \Phi_M ([K^{S_{n-2} \cup L}]) = \Phi_M ([K^{S_n} \cup L]) \quad \text{for every integer } n.
\]

**4.2. The classical shadow of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation.** Consider the character variety
\[
\mathcal{R}_{SL_2(\mathbb{C})}(S) = \{\text{homomorphisms } r : \pi_1(S) \to SL_2(\mathbb{C})\}/\text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})
\]
where \(SL_2(\mathbb{C})\) acts on homomorphisms \(\pi_1(S) \to SL_2(\mathbb{C})\) by conjugation, and where the double bar indicates that one takes the quotient in the sense of geometric invariant theory. In practice, this means that two homomorphisms \(r, r' : \pi_1(S) \to SL_2(\mathbb{C})\) represent the same point of \(\mathcal{R}_{SL_2(\mathbb{C})}(S)\) if and only if they induce the same trace functions, namely if and only if \(\text{Tr} r(\gamma) = \text{Tr} r'(\gamma)\) for every \(\gamma \in \pi_1(S)\).

**Theorem 13 ([BHW12a]).** Suppose that \(A\) is a primitive \(2N\)-root of unity with \(N\) odd. If \(\rho : S^A(S) \to \text{End}(V)\) is an irreducible representation of the skein algebra \(S^A(S)\), then there exists a unique character \(r_\rho \in \mathcal{R}_{SL_2(\mathbb{C})}(S)\) such that
\[
\rho([K^{T_n}]) = -\text{Tr} r_\rho(K) \text{Id}_V
\]
for every framed knot $K \subset S \times [0,1]$.

By definition, $r_\rho \in \mathcal{R}_{\text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})}(S)$ is the classical shadow of the representation $\rho: \mathcal{S}^A(S) \to \text{End}(V)$.

**Theorem 14.** When $A$ is a primitive $2N$–root of unity with $N$ odd, the classical shadow of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation $\rho: \mathcal{S}^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$ is the trivial character $i \in \mathcal{R}_{\text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})}(S)$, represented by the trivial homomorphism $\pi_1(S) \to \text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})$.

**Proof.** This is a relatively simple consequence of Lemma 12. Identify $S \times [0,1]$ to a tubular neighborhood of the boundary $S = \partial M$ in the 3–manifold $M$. To compute $\rho([K^{T_N}]) \in \text{End}(V_S)$ for a framed knot $K \subset S \times [0,1]$, Lemma 5 shows that it suffices to consider its action on those elements of $V_S$ of the form $v = \Phi_M([L])$ for a framed link $L \subset M$. Pushing $L$ away from the neighborhood $S \times [0,1]$ of $S = \partial M$ in $M$,

$$\rho([K^{T_N}]) v = \Phi_M([K^{T_N} \cup L]) = \Phi_M([K^{xS_{n-1} - 2S_{n-2} \cup L}])$$

$$= \Phi_M([K^{xS_{n-1} \cup L}]) - 2\Phi_M([K^{S_{n-2} \cup L}]),$$

using the property that $T_n(x) = S_n(x) - S_{n-2}(x) = xS_{n-1}(x) - 2S_{n-2}(x)$ for every $n$.

The term $[K^{xS_{n-1} \cup L}] \in \mathcal{S}^A(M)$ is also equal to $[K^{S_{n-1} \cup K' \cup L}]$ where $K'$ is a push-off of $K$ in the direction given by the framing. Its image $\Phi_M([K^{S_{n-1} \cup K' \cup L}])$ in $V_S$ is therefore equal to 0 by Part (1) of Lemma 12. Similarly, Part (2) of Lemma 12 shows that

$$\Phi_M([K^{S_{n-2} \cup L}]) = \Phi_M([K^{xS_{n-1} \cup L}]) = \Phi_M([K \cup L]) = \Phi_M([L]) = v.$$

(Note that, since $1 = x^0$, the skein $[K^1] = [K^{(0)}]$ is represented by 0 copies of the knot $K$, and is therefore trivial.)

Therefore, $\rho([K^{T_N}]) v = -2v$ for every $v = \Phi_M([L]) \in V_S$ represented by a framed link $L \subset M$. Since these elements generate $V_S$ by Lemma 5, it follows that $\rho([K^{T_N}]) = -2\text{Id}_{V_S}$.

If $r_\rho$ is the classical shadow of the Witten-Reshetikhin-Turaev representation $\rho: \mathcal{S}^A(S) \to \text{End}(V_S)$, this proves that $\text{Tr} r_\rho(K) = 2$ for every closed curve $K \subset S \times [0,1]$. This means that $r_\rho \in \mathcal{R}_{\text{SL}_2(\mathbb{C})}(S)$ is the character represented by the trivial homomorphism.

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