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Jonathan Culler  
**LITERARY  
THEORY**  
A Very Short Introduction

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

1997

## Chapter 6

### Narrative

Once upon a time, *literature* meant above all poetry. The novel was a modern upstart, too close to biography or chronicle to be genuinely literary, a popular form that could not aspire to the high callings of lyric and epic poetry. But in the twentieth century the novel has eclipsed poetry, both as what writers write and what readers read and, since the 1960s, narrative has come to dominate literary education as well. People still study poetry – often, it is required – but novels and short stories have become the core of the curriculum.

This is not just a result of the preferences of a mass readership, who happily pick up stories but seldom read poems. Literary and cultural theory have increasingly claimed cultural centrality for narrative. Stories, the argument goes, are the main way we make sense of things, whether in thinking of our lives as a progression leading somewhere or in telling ourselves what is happening in the world. Scientific explanation makes sense of things by placing them under laws – whenever *a* and *b* obtains, *c* will occur – but life is generally not like that. It follows not a scientific logic of cause and effect but the logic of story, where to understand is to conceive of how one thing leads to another, how something might have come about: how Maggie ended up selling software in Singapore, how George's father came to give him a car.

We make sense of events through possible stories; philosophers of

history, I mentioned in Chapter 2, have even argued that the historical explanation follows not the logic of scientific causality but the logic of story: to understand the French Revolution is to grasp a narrative showing how one event led to another. Narrative structures are pervasive: Frank Kermode notes that when we say a ticking clock goes 'tick-tock', we give the noise a fictional structure, differentiating between two physically identical sounds, to make *tick* a beginning and *tock* an end. 'The clock's tick-tock I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form.'

The theory of narrative ('narratology') has been an active branch of literary theory, and literary study relies on theories of narrative structure: on notions of plot, of different kinds of narrators, of narrative techniques. The poetics of narrative, as we might call it, both attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyses how particular narratives achieve their effects.

But narrative is not just an academic subject. There is a basic human drive to hear and tell stories. Children very early develop what one might call a basic narrative competence: demanding stories, they know when you are trying to cheat by stopping before reaching the end. So the first question for the theory of narrative might be, what do we implicitly know about the basic shape of stories that enables us to distinguish between a story that ends 'properly' and one that doesn't, where things are left hanging? The theory of narrative might, then, be conceived as an attempt to spell out, to make explicit, this narrative competence, just as linguistics is an attempt to make explicit linguistic competence: what speakers of a language unconsciously know in knowing a language. Theory here can be conceived as a setting forth of an intuitive cultural knowledge or understanding.

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## Plot

What are the elemental requirements of a story? Aristotle says that plot is the most basic feature of narrative, that good stories must have a beginning, middle, and end, and that they give pleasure because of the rhythm of their ordering. But what creates the impression that a particular series of events has this shape? Theorists have proposed various accounts. Essentially, though, a plot requires a transformation. There must be an initial situation, a change involving some sort of reversal, and a resolution that marks the change as significant. Some theories emphasize types of parallelism that produce satisfactory plots, such as the move from one relationship between characters to its opposite, or from a fear or prediction to its realization or its inversion; from a problem to its solution, or from a false accusation or misrepresentation to its rectification. In each case we find the association of a development on the level of events with a transformation on the level of theme. A mere sequence of events does not make a story. There must be an end relating back to the beginning – according to some theorists, an end that indicates what has happened to the desire that led to the events the story narrates.

If narrative theory is an account of narrative competence, it must focus also on readers' ability to identify plots. Readers can tell that two works are versions of the same story; they can summarize plots and discuss the adequacy of a plot summary. It's not that they will always agree, but disagreements are likely to reveal considerable shared understanding. The theory of narrative postulates the existence of a level of structure – what we generally call 'plot' – independent of any particular language or representational medium. Unlike poetry, which gets lost in translation, plot can be preserved in translation from one language or one medium into another: a silent film or a comic strip can have the same plot as a short story.

We discover, though, that there are two ways of thinking about plot.

From one angle, plot is a way of shaping events to make them into a genuine story: writers and readers shape events into a plot in their attempts to make sense of things. From another angle, plot is what gets shaped by narratives, as they present the same 'story' in different ways. So a sequence of acts by three characters can be shaped (by writers and readers) into the elementary plot of heterosexual love, where a young man seeks to wed a young woman, their desire is resisted by paternal opposition, but some twist of events allows the young lovers to come together. This plot with three characters can be presented in narrative from the point of view of the suffering heroine, or the angry father, or the young man, or an external observer puzzled by these events, or an omniscient narrator who can describe each character's innermost feelings or who takes a knowing distance from these goings-on. From this angle, the plot or story is the given and the discourse is the varied presentations of it.

The three levels I have been discussing – events, plot (or story), and discourse – function as two oppositions: between events and plot, and between story and discourse.

events/plot

story/discourse

Plot or story is the material that is presented, ordered from a certain point of view by discourse (different versions of 'the same story'). But plot itself is already a shaping of events. A plot can make a wedding the happy ending of the story or the beginning of a story – or can make it a turn in the middle. What readers actually encounter, though, is the discourse of a text: the plot is something readers *infer* from the text, and the idea of elementary events out of which this plot was formed is also an inference or construction of the reader. If we talk about events that have been shaped into a plot, it is to highlight the meaningfulness and organization of the plot.

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## Presentation

The basic distinction of the theory of narrative, then, is between plot and presentation, story and discourse. (The terminology varies from one theorist to another.) Confronted with a text (a term that includes films and other representations), the reader makes sense of it by identifying the story and then seeing the text as one particular presentation of that story: by identifying 'what happens', we are able to think of the rest of the verbal material as the way of portraying what takes place. Then we can ask what type of presentation has been chosen and what difference that makes. There are many variables, and they are crucial to narratives' effects. Much narrative theory explores different ways of conceiving these variables. Here are some key questions that identify meaningful variation.

## Literary Theory

*Who speaks?* By convention every narrative is said to have a narrator, who may stand outside the story or be a character within it. Theorists distinguish 'first person narration', where a narrator says 'I', from what is somewhat confusingly called 'third person narration', where there is no 'I' – the narrator is not identified as a character in the story and all the characters are referred to in the third person, by name or as 'he' or 'she'. First person narrators may be the main *protagonists* of the story they tell; they may be *participants*, minor characters in the story; or they may be *observers* of the story, whose function is not to act but to describe things to us. First person observers may be fully developed as individuals with a name, history, and personality, or they may not be developed at all and quickly drop from sight as the narration gets under way, effacing themselves after introducing the story.

*Who speaks to whom?* The author creates a text which is read by readers. Readers infer from the text a narrator, a voice which speaks. The narrator addresses listeners who are sometimes implied or constructed, sometimes explicitly identified (especially in stories within stories, where one character becomes the narrator and tells the inner story to

other characters). The narrator's audience is often called the *narratee*. Whether or not narratees are explicitly identified, the narrative implicitly constructs an audience by what its narration takes for granted and what it explains. A work from another time and place usually implies an audience that recognizes certain references and shares certain assumptions that a modern reader may not share. Feminist criticism has been especially interested in the way that European and American narratives frequently posit a male reader: the reader is implicitly addressed as one who shares a masculine view.

*Who speaks when?* Narration may be situated at the time at which events occur (as in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, where narration takes the form, 'now x is happening, now y is happening, now z is happening'). Telling may immediately follow particular events, as in epistolary novels (novels in the form of letters), such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, where each letter deals with what had happened up to that point. Or, as is most common, narration may occur after the final events in the narrative, as the narrator looks back on the entire sequence.

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*Who speaks what language?* Narrative voices may have their own distinctive language, in which they recount everything in the story, or they may adopt and report the language of others. A narrative that sees things through the consciousness of a child may either use adult language to report the child's perceptions or slip into a child's language. The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin describes the novel as fundamentally polyphonic (multi-voiced) or dialogic rather than monological (single-voiced): the essence of the novel is its staging of different voices or discourses and, thus, of the clash of social perspectives and points of view.

*Who speaks with what authority?* To tell a story is to claim a certain authority, which listeners grant. When the narrator of Jane Austen's *Emma* begins, 'Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, . . . we don't sceptically

wonder whether she really was handsome and clever. We accept this statement until we are given reason to think otherwise. Narrators are sometimes termed *unreliable* when they provide enough information about situations and clues about their own biases to make us doubt their interpretations of events, or when we find reasons to doubt that the narrator shares the same values as the author. Theorists speak of *self-conscious narration* when narrators discuss the fact that they are telling a story, hesitate about how to tell it, or even flaunt the fact that they can determine how the story will turn out. Self-conscious narration highlights the problem of narrative authority.

## Focalization

Who sees? Discussions of narrative frequently speak of the 'point of view from which a story is told', but this use of *point of view* confuses two separate questions: who speaks? and whose vision is presented? Henry James's novel *What Maisie Knew* employs a narrator who is not a child but it presents the story through the consciousness of the child Maisie. Maisie is not the narrator; she is described in the third person, as 'she', but the novel presents many things from her perspective. Maisie, for example, does not fully understand the sexual dimension of relations between the adults around her. The story is, to use a term developed by the theorists of narrative Mieke Bal and Gérard Genette, *focalized* through her. Hers is the consciousness or position through which events are brought into focus. The question 'who speaks?', then, is separate from the question of 'who sees?' From whose perspective are the events brought into focus and presented? The focalizer may or may not be the same as the narrator. There are numerous variables here.

1. Temporal. Narration may focalize events from the time at which they occurred, from shortly afterwards, or from long afterwards. It may focus on what the focalizer knew or thought at the time of the event or how she saw things later, with the benefit of hindsight. In recounting something that happened to her as a child, a narrator may focalize the

event through the consciousness of the child she was, restricting the account to what she thought and felt at the time, or she may focalize events through her knowledge and understanding at the time of narration. Or, of course, she may combine these perspectives, moving between what she knew or felt then and what she recognizes now. When third person narration focalizes events through a particular character, it can employ similar variations, recounting how things seemed to the character at the time or how they are perceived later. The choice of temporal focalization makes an enormous difference in a narrative's effects. Detective stories, for instance, recount only what the focalizer knew at each moment of the investigation, saving the knowledge of the outcome for the climax.

2. Distance and speed. The story may be focalized through a microscope, as it were, or through a telescope, proceeding slowly with great detail or quickly telling us what happened: 'The grateful Monarch gave the Prince his daughter's hand in marriage, and when the King died, the Prince succeeded to the throne and reigned happily for many years.' Related to speed are variations in frequency: we can be told what happened on a particular occasion or what happened every Thursday. Most distinctive is what Gérard Genette calls the 'pseudo-iterative', in which something so specific that it could not happen over and over is presented as what regularly happened.

3. Limitations of knowledge. At one extreme, a narrative may focalize the story through a very limited perspective – a 'camera's eye' or 'fly on the wall' perspective – recounting actions without giving us access to characters' thoughts. Even here, great variations can occur depending on what degree of understanding 'objective' or 'external' descriptions imply. Thus, 'the old man lit a cigarette' seems focalized through an observer familiar with human activities, whereas 'the human with whitish hairs on the top of his head held a flaming stick close to him, and smoke began to rise from a white tube attached to his body' seems focalized through a space alien or person who is very 'spaced out'. At

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the other extreme lies what is called 'omniscient narration' where the focalizer is a godlike figure who has access to the innermost thoughts and hidden motives of the characters: 'The king was pleased beyond measure at the sight, but his greed for gold was still not satisfied.' Omniscient narration, where there seem in principle no limitations on what can be known and told, is common not only in traditional tales but in modern novels, where the choice of what will actually be told is crucial.

Stories focalized primarily through the consciousness of a single character occur both in first person narration, where the narrator tells what he or she thought and observed, and in third person narration, where it is often called 'third person limited point of view', as in *What Maisie Knew*. *Unreliable narration* can result from limitations of point of view – when we gain a sense that the consciousness through which focalization occurs is unable or unwilling to understand the events as competent story-readers would.

These and other variations in narration and focalization do much to determine the overall effect of novels. A story with omniscient narration, detailing the feelings and hidden motivations of protagonists and displaying knowledge of how events will turn out, may give the impression of the comprehensibility of the world. It may highlight, for example, the contrast between what people intend and what inevitably happens ('Little did he know that two hours later he would be run over by a carriage and all his plans come to naught'). A story told from the limited point of view of a single protagonist may highlight the utter unpredictability of what happens; since we don't know what other characters are thinking, or what else is going on, everything that occurs to this character may be a surprise. The complications of narrative are further heightened by the embedding of stories within other stories, so that the act of telling a story becomes an event in the story – an event whose consequences and significance become a principal concern. Stories within stories within stories.

## What stories do

Theorists also discuss the function of stories. I mentioned in Chapter 2 that 'narrative display texts', a class which includes both literary narratives and stories people tell one another, circulate because their stories are tellable, 'worth it'. Story-tellers are always warding off the potential question, 'So what?' But what makes a story 'worth it'? What do stories do?

First, they give pleasure – pleasure, Aristotle tells us, through their imitation of life and their rhythm. The narrative patterning that produces a twist, as when the biter is bitten or the tables are turned, gives pleasure in itself, and many narratives have essentially this function: to amuse listeners by giving a new twist to familiar situations.

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The pleasure of narrative is linked to desire. Plots tell of desire and what befalls it, but the movement of narrative itself is driven by desire in the form of 'epistemophilia', a desire to know: we want to discover secrets, to know the end, to find the truth. If what drives narrative is the 'masculine' urge to mastery, the desire to unveil the truth (the 'naked truth'), then what of the knowledge that narrative offers us to satisfy that wish? Is that knowledge itself an effect of desire? Theorists ask such questions about the links between desire, stories, and knowledge.

For stories also have the function, as theorists have emphasized, of teaching us about the world, showing us how it works, enabling us – through the devices of focalization – to see things from other vantage points, and to understand others' motives that in general are opaque to us. The novelist E. M. Forster observes that in offering the possibility of perfect knowledge of others, novels compensate for our dimness about others in 'real' life. Characters in novels

are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible: we are people whose secret lives are invisible. And that is why novels, even when

they are about wicked people, can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power.

Through the knowledge they present, narratives police. Novels in the Western tradition show how aspirations are tamed and desires adjusted to social reality. Many novels are the story of youthful illusions crushed. They tell us of desire, provoke desire, lay down for us the scenarios of heterosexual desire, and, since the eighteenth century, they have increasingly worked to suggest that we achieve our true identity, if at all, in love, in personal relations, rather than in public action. But as they coach us to believe that there is such a thing as 'being in love', they also subject that idea to demystification.

In so far as we become who we are through a series of identifications (see Chapter 8), novels are a powerful device for the internalization of social norms. But narratives also provide a mode of social criticism. They expose the hollowness of worldly success, the world's corruption, its failure to meet our noblest aspirations. They expose the predicaments of the oppressed, in stories that invite readers, through identification, to see certain situations as intolerable.

Finally, the basic question for theory in the domain of narrative is this: is narrative a fundamental form of knowledge (giving knowledge of the world through its sense-making) or is it a rhetorical structure that distorts as much as it reveals? Is narrative a source of knowledge or of illusion? Is the knowledge it purports to present a knowledge that is the effect of desire? The trickster Paul de Man observes that while no one in his right mind would try to grow grapes by the light of the word *day*, we find it very hard indeed to avoid conceiving of our lives by patterns of fictional narratives. Does this imply that narratives' clarifying and consoling effects are delusory?

To answer these questions we would need both knowledge of the world

that is independent of narratives and some basis for deeming this knowledge more authoritative than what narratives provide. But whether there is such authoritative knowledge separate from narrative is precisely what's at stake in the question of whether narrative is a source of knowledge or of illusion. So it seems likely that we cannot answer this question, if indeed it has an answer. Instead we must move back and forth between awareness of narrative as a rhetorical structure that produces the illusion of perspicacity and a study of narrative as the principal kind of sense-making at our disposal. After all, even the exposure of narrative as rhetoric has the structure of a narrative: it is a story in which our initial delusion yields to the harsh light of truth and we emerge sadder but wiser, disillusioned but chastened. We stop dancing around and contemplate the secret. So the story goes.

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### Chapter 3

'Forum: Thirty-Two Letters on the Relation between Cultural Studies and the Literary', *PMLA* 112: 2 (Mar. 1997), 257–86, a lively spectrum of current views. Anthony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies* surveys British developments. Tony Bennett et al., eds., *Culture, Ideology, and Social Process: A Reader* (London: Batsford & Open University Press, 1987), an anthology of classic British essays for the Open University's 'Popular Culture' course. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin, 1989), an accessible introduction. Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993), and Mieke Bal, ed., *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), two recent collections. Joan Davies, *Cultural Studies and Beyond: Fragments of Empire* (London: Routledge, 1995), a shrewd recent history. LITERARY CANON: Robert von Hallberg, ed., *Canons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

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Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (London: Fontana, 1976; rev. edn.: Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), an introduction to his thought and influence. M. A. K. Halliday, *Explorations in the Functions of Language* (London: Arnold, 1973), essays relevant to literary studies. Roger Fowler, *Linguistic Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), a valuable introduction to language and the linguistic dimensions of literature. William Ray, *Literary Meaning: From Phenomenology to Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984) develops a convincing narrative about different critical schools' approaches to meaning in literature. Nigel Fabb et al., eds., *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), strong recent essays. POETICS: Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge, 1975); Roland Barthes, *Œuvres* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974), analysis of a Balzac story that switches

between poetics and hermeneutics. HERMENEUTICS: Donald Marshall, 'Literary Interpretation', in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, ed. Joseph Gibaldi, 2nd edn. (New York: MLA, 1992), 159–82. READER-RESPONSE CRITICISM: Jane Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

### Chapter 5

RHETORIC: Renato Barilli, *Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), a historical survey of key issues. GENRES: Paul Hermadi, *Beyond Genre: New Directions in Literary Classification* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972). APOSTROPHE: Jonathan Culler, 'Apostrophe', *The Pursuit of Signs, Semiotics Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1981), 135–54. POETICS: Jonathan Culler, 'Poetics of the Lyric', *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 161–88. POETRY: For a range of essays engaged with theoretical questions, Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, eds., *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Jacques Derrida, 'What is Poetry?' ('Che cos'è la poesia'), in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 221–46.

### Further Reading

### Chapter 6

Two excellent, systematic books are Susan Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), and Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 2nd rev. edn. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997). See also Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983); Jonathan Culler, 'Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative', *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 169–87; Jonathan Culler, 'Poetics of the Novel', *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul,



