

# The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative

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Chpts 4 + 5



world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow. Enchanted and enthralled, I stopped her constantly to ask for details. My imagination blazed. The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me."<sup>1</sup> This chapter and the next are devoted to some of the major rhetorical effects of narrative and some of the devices that produce them. In this chapter, I will start out with two closely related effects that are more mundane than what Wright was describing, but no less important for that – the sense of *causation* and (more broadly) *normalization*. Then I will turn to a major rhetorical device, the *masterplot*. Chapter Four is devoted entirely to the issue of *closure*, which is both an effect and a device in narrative's rhetorical arsenal.

### Causation

We are made in such a way that we continually look for the causes of things. The inevitable linearity of story makes narrative a powerful means of gratifying this need (whether accurately or not is another issue, which we will come to shortly). No wonder, then, that many of the greatest narratives (the Babylonian *Har of the Gods*, the Book of Genesis in the Bible, the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost*) are narratives of causation on the largest scale. Epics like the *Har of the Gods*, tell us about the origin of life itself. Sometimes these two – the origin of the nation and the origin of life on earth – are the same:

You know, everything had to begin, and this is how it was: the Kiowas came one by one into the world through a hollow log. They were many more than now, but not all of them got out. There was a woman whose body was swollen up with child, and she got stuck in the log. After that, no one could get through, and that is why the Kiowas are a small tribe in number. They looked all around and saw the world. It made them glad to see so many things. They called themselves *Kiwada*, "coming out."<sup>2</sup>

N. Scott Momaday's rendering of the Kiowa myth of origin not only tells how the Kiowa people came into being, but it also answers other questions of causation: Why are there so few of us? Why do we love the world so much? How were we named? Myths and epics are kinds of narrative that, among other things, explain the world for us in terms of cause.

But the issue of reading causation in narrative is not restricted to myths and epics. Narrative itself, simply by the way it distributes events in an orderly, consecutive fashion, very often gives the impression of a sequence of cause and effect.

## Chapter 4

### The rhetoric of narrative

#### The rhetoric of narrative

The rhetoric of narrative is its power. It has to do with all those elements of the text that produce the many strong or subtle combinations of feeling and thought we experience as we read. These include those elements that infect how we interpret the narrative: that is, how we find meanings in it. Arguably, *everything* in the text contributes to its impact and our interpretation of it, and so everything has some rhetorical function. Change one thing, and the effect of the whole changes, if only subtly. As Barthes says, "everything in [the text] signifies. . . . Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness" ("Structural Analysis," 261).

#### Who is exercising this power?

Note that when Barthes says that "everything has a meaning" he is not saying that the author of the text is necessarily in control of, or even aware of, the meaning of everything in the text. This is not to denigrate authors or to demean their often extraordinary gifts, but to acknowledge that interpreting texts is a complex transaction that invariably has to do with more than what the author consciously intended. The issue of meaning and its relation to the author is as important as it is vexed. I will return to this issue in Chapters Seven and Eight. But it is important to establish before we get too far along that the impact of a narrative, including its meaning, is not something that is securely under the author's control.

It is no exaggeration, then, to call narrative an instrument of power, and in fact many exceptionally powerful narratives reflect upon this power. Richard Wright, who became a story-teller of great power in his own right, described the impact of hearing the story of Bluebeard as a poor black child in the South: "As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered, and the

"Please," he implored, "give me one more chance!"  
Suddenly she felt a headache coming on.

Reading these two lines of narrative in succession, one automatically connects her headache with *his* emotional outburst. In the real world, the headache could arise from any number of causes: hypoglycemia, a stroke, migraine, barometric pressure. But given the information we have, and the narrative form in which we have it, we will read a causal connection whereby what comes after (her headache) is triggered by what went before (his pleading). Some might contend that we need more than this to allocate cause. In a classic study of the novel, E. M. Forster argued that there is a major difference between a narrative like "The king died and then the queen died" and one like "The king died and then the queen died of grief." The difference, he argued, is that the latter shows causation.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as Chatman argues, the sequencing of narrative works on us so suggestively, that we often don't need the explicit assignment of cause to be encouraged to think causally.

[T]he interesting thing is that our minds inveterately seek structure, and they will provide it if necessary. Unless otherwise instructed, readers will tend to assume that even "The king died and the queen died" presents a causal link, that the king's death has something to do with the queen's. We do so in the same spirit in which we seek coherence in the visual field, that is, we are inherently disposed to turn raw sensation into perception. (*Story and Discourse*, 45-6)

### Must narratives show cause?

As I noted in Chapter Two, there are narratologists who require a clear causal sequence as an essential defining feature of narrative, though in this book, I (along with others) am casting my net more broadly, defining narrative as "the representation of events," whether bound together by a clear sequence of causation or not. A quest story, for example, can include many events that come one after another without causal connection (first the knight sinks into a bog, then he is set upon by wild rodents, then his pants catch on fire . . .), yet it would be difficult on that score alone to say that it is not a narrative. Here is an instance where the term **narrativity** may help. For, if the sense of causation is not a defining feature of narrative, it is so commonly a feature that we can say that its presence increases narrativity.

Narrative by its arrangement of events gratifies our need for order, of which perhaps the commonest is the kind of order we have just been

discussing, the perception of cause. If this can make narrative a gratifying experience, it can also make it a treacherous one, since it implicitly draws on an ancient fallacy that things that follow other things are caused by those things. The Latin phrase for this fallacy is "*post hoc ergo propter hoc*" (literally: "after this, therefore because of this"). Barthes goes so far as to call this fallacy "the mainspring of narrative . . . the confusion of consequence and consequence, what comes *after* being read in narrative as what is *caused by*" ("Structural Analysis," 266). Bad social science frequently exploits the force of this narrative illusion. "Teen Crime Rate Drops 18% after Uniforms Introduced in Local Schools." Such a headline, in effect, is a short narrative, trading on the seductive force of this common confusion whereby mere consecution (one thing following another) is taken to suggest cause.

Another way of putting the *propter hoc* fallacy is the rule that scientists cut their teeth on: a correlation does not establish a cause and effect relationship. The author of this book had a grandmother whose narrative consciousness in this regard was quite strong. For example, she found that our visits to her house invariably correlated with heavier-than-usual sunspot activity. I am not entirely sure what she was getting at, but my assumption is that she was making a causal connection between the occurrence of sunspots and our visits. It is easy to laugh at my grandmother's sense of causation because the two events (sunspots and our visits) are separated by so great a distance. But for millennia, astrologers have been invoking the same narrative logic over distances extending from events on earth to stars that are many light years beyond the sun. In less obvious (and therefore more insidious) forms, this same narrative sleight-of-hand thrives on a daily basis in political speeches, sermons, advertising, legal disputes, and many other forms of public discourse. Often, of course, these narratives draw their power from what we want to be the case ("Use these breath mints and, we guarantee, your loneliness will be at an end"). Desire, wedded to the suggestiveness of narrative succession, is an awfully powerful combination.

But it isn't just our human desire, plus illusion, that makes us suckers for this logic. We fall for it in part because so often during our lives we have actually experienced stories (true ones) in which *post hoc ergo propter hoc* seems to be vividly confirmed. First we lean back in the chair, then we fall over backward. After all, cause and effect work sequentially, just as stories do. In the Newtonian universe, which is the universe we grow up in, effects always follow causes. So there is a good empirical basis to explain why, when reading narratives, we should be tempted to apply this paradigm more quickly than we ought to. The error lies in passing from the valid assumption that all effects follow their causes to the false one that

to follow something is to be an effect of that thing. A cause can in fact be any number of things, or any combination of things, that precede an effect, not necessarily the thing the narrative draws to our attention. Conversely, we could say that scientists, conducting their experiments, are trying to write narratives that are so uncluttered by competing elements that cause and effect are genuinely demonstrable in the stories they tell.

### Which comes first, cause or effect?

This may sound like an odd question to ask, but Jonathan Culler draws on an insight developed by Nietzsche to argue that what we assume to be plain common sense may be a mental operation that runs in the opposite direction.

[F]irst, there is cause; then, there is effect; first a mosquito bites one's arm, then one feels pain. But, says Nietzsche, this sequence is not given; it is constructed by a rhetorical operation. What happens may be, for example, that we feel a pain and then look around for some factor we can treat as a cause. The "real" causal sequence may be: first pain, then mosquito. It is the effect that causes us to produce a cause; a tropological operation then reorders the sequence pain-mosquito as mosquito-pain. This latter sequence is the product of discursive forces, but we treat it as a given, as the true order.<sup>4</sup>

### Normalization

The impression of causation that we have been examining is one of the ways – a powerful one – of suggesting normality. But we can extend the rhetorical leverage of normalizing to many other features of narrativity. In this sense, narrative could be called a kind of "rhetoric of the real" in that it accounts for things. You could in fact argue, and people have, that our need for narrative form is so strong that we don't really believe something is true unless we can see it as a story. Bringing a collection of events into narrative coherence can be described as a way of normalizing or naturalizing those events. It renders them plausible, allowing one to see how they all "belong." This is a constant theme in the work of historian Hayden White:

The very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction presupposes a notion of reality in which "the true" is identified with "the real" only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity.<sup>5</sup>

This is also a condition that the Austrian novelist Robert Musil examined at the personal level in his long unfinished work, *The Man Without Qualities*

(1930, 1932): "Most people relate to themselves as storytellers. . . they love the orderly sequence of facts because it has the look of necessity, and the impression that their life has a 'course' is somehow their refuge from chaos." Ulrich, the protagonist of the novel, finds to his dismay that the illusion no longer works: "he had lost this elementary, narrative mode of thought to which private life still clings, even though everything in public life has already ceased to be narrative and no longer following a thread, but instead spreads out as an infinitely interwoven surface."<sup>6</sup>

"Nothing in Government occurs by accident. If it occurs, know that it was planned that way."

– Patriot militia member

The unwillingness to tolerate the condition of unknowing in which we all live may lie behind the ancient and persistent tendency to believe that some powerful force controls all aspects of our lives – a power, in other words, writing a story that will eventually become clear. Some apply this at the political level to sinister forces, like the government or international conspiracies. But in fact this has long been, and continues to be, a very common way of viewing the universe itself. In his 1979 study of the interpretation of narrative, Frank Kermode puts this point strongly:

If there is one belief (however the facts resist it) that unites us all, from the evangelists to those who argue away inconvenient portions of their texts, and those who spin large plots to accommodate the discrepancies and dissonances into some larger scheme, it is this conviction that somehow, in some occult fashion, if we could only detect it, everything will be found to hang together. (*Genesis of Secrecy*, 72)

Certainly we can all think of examples where the attraction of narrative coherence has overridden both reason and the evidence of the senses. The mass suicide in California of cult members dedicated to the idea that they will be rescued from this life by a spaceship hidden behind comet Hale-Bopp was an event that required suppressing awareness of a host of contradictions between the story and the facts of the empirical world. But given the urgency of their need, cult members found in this scenario a story in which they could place themselves and which (if true) would rescue them from the trials of their mortality. Bizarre as it seems, the incident demonstrates the enormous persuasive power of narrative coherence when wedded to human desire.

But here again there is need for caution in our generalizing. We are also well aware of narratives that purport to be true but which, precisely because of their narrativity, fail to persuade. "Oh, don't believe in that," we say, "it's

just a story. So it is not narrativity in itself that persuades us that a story is true, but some subset of the qualities that convey narrativity. Two possible candidates are the qualities of "continuity" and "narrative coherence." If it "hangs together," as Kermode writes, it responds to a bias that favors order over chaos. But then there are numerous fairy tales that have wonderful continuity and coherence that we would never mistake for reality. The issue gets more complicated still. For some, the very qualities that make a narrative convincing are for others qualities that invalidate it. Qualities of the tale that lured the cult members referred to above are qualities that for others make it "just a story." For a more powerful example of how differently different people read narrative, we need go no further than the divided public reaction to the verdict in the first trial of O. J. Simpson.

In the summer of 1994, the black American athlete and media celebrity O. J. Simpson was charged with the brutal slaying of his wife, Nicole Simpson, and Ronald Goldman, both of whom were white. The sensational trial that followed lasted a year and concluded with Simpson's acquittal. The Simpson trial, like any trial, was a contest of narratives involving two parties, each seeking to bring the facts (or what could be adduced as facts) into conformity with a coherent narrative that favored its conception of the accused. It is important to stress at this point that people can actually be "persuaded by the evidence," just as it is true that someone (or ones) definitely did kill Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman, and that O. J. Simpson either is or is not guilty of these crimes. The truth, as the expression goes, is out there. But the intensity with which people adhere to one narrative explanation or the other often has less to do with raw evidence and more to do with a potent instrument of narrative, which we can call the masterplot.

## Masterplots

There are stories that we tell over and over in myriad forms and that connect vitally with our deepest values, wishes, and fears. Cinderella is one of them. Its variants can be found frequently in European and American cultures. Its constituent events elaborate a thread of neglect, injustice, rebirth, and reward that responds to deeply held anxieties and desires. As such, the Cinderella masterplot has an enormous emotional capital that can be drawn on in constructing a narrative. But it is only one of many masterplots. We seem to connect our thinking about life, and particularly about our own lives, to a number of masterplots that we may or may not be fully aware of. To the extent that our values and identity are linked to a masterplot, that masterplot can have strong rhetorical impact. We tend to give credibility to narratives that are structured by it.

## The term "masterplot"

There have been many terms used for what I am calling a masterplot. One currently in favor is "master narrative." But if you take seriously the important distinction between story and narrative, it should be obvious why "master narrative" would not work for this concept. A narrative is a particular rendering of a story. Works like *War and Peace* or *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* are narratives. The masterplots that undergird these narratives are much more skeletal and adaptable, and they can recur in narrative after narrative. Roger Shank actually proposed the term "story skeleton" for something like masterplots (147–88). The term is a good one, but it does not convey the rhetorical power that accompanies a masterplot. Stephen Jay Gould's term "canonical story" catches something of that power by alluding to the concept of a "canon" with its connotation of official sanction (as in a culture's recognized canonical works).<sup>7</sup> But this suggests stories that are somehow certified, whereas masterplots often work in secret, influencing us without our wholly realizing it. Finally, the term "archetype," which used to enjoy more currency than it does now, comes quite close to the concept of a masterplot. The problem with "archetype" is its Jungian baggage, particularly the implication that these stories are warehoused in a collective memory that is part of our biological or spiritual inheritance. For all these reasons, I prefer "masterplot." It is not perfect. The term "plot," for example, is frequently used to mean "narrative discourse," especially among European narratologists. But "plot" very commonly means "story" in English, and I have drawn on that meaning, while "master" conveys something of the power of the particular stories that I am calling "masterplots."

There are some masterplots, very loosely conceived, that would appear to be universal: the quest, the story of revenge, seasonal myths of death and regeneration. But the more culturally specific the masterplot, the greater its practical force in everyday life. All national cultures have their masterplots, some of which are local variations on universal masterplots. The Horatio Alger story, for example, is a variation on the quest masterplot that speaks directly to cherished values in broad swathes of US culture. It takes its name from Horatio Alger, an enormously popular nineteenth-century novelist who published over 120 books. Most of these books narrativize the same masterplot featuring a youth (Ragged Dick, Tattered Tom), who, though born in poverty, rises by his own hard work and clean living to the highest level of social standing and often great wealth. The Horatio Alger story has

been told and retold throughout American history. It is the story of such diverse figures as Andrew Carnegie and Abe Lincoln and it expresses in its shape convictions about life that are dear to many Americans. It is tempting to see these masterplots as a kind of cultural glue that holds societies together. They constitute, to quote Kermode again, "the mythological structure of a society from which we derive comfort, and which it may be uncomfortable to dispute" (113).

But no culture can be summed up in one masterplot. There are many other masterplots in American culture beside the Horatio Alger story. Some of them are not so dear to some Americans, but carry just as much affective power. When the black motorist Rodney King was caught and beaten by Los Angeles policemen in 1991, the incident activated a very different American masterplot from the Horatio Alger story. Yet this masterplot is equally American, and for many black citizens it expresses a feature of life in America that goes further and deeper than Horatio Alger. Looked at from the perspective of narrative, then, national culture is a complex weave of numerous, often conflicting, masterplots.

Skilled lawyers arguing before a jury, or politicians addressing their constituents, or advertisers seeking to create a market can gain rhetorical leverage by handling the narratives they use in such a way as to activate cherished masterplots of their audience. The sharp differences in the reactions to the Simpson verdict and the intensity with which they were (and still are) held owe much to the fact that Simpson's "story" was bonded during the trial to several powerful, yet sharply divergent, masterplots in American culture. One that worked powerfully in Simpson's favor is the story of the black man who is unjustly punished for stepping "out of his place." In this masterplot, the blackness of the victim facilitates the punishment by allowing him easily to be tagged as a criminal. It is a story that has been told in many versions from the slave narratives of the nineteenth century to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Another powerful masterplot that came into play throughout the trial is the story of the battered wife. This masterplot was deployed frequently by the prosecution, with Nicole Simpson cast in the central role. A third is the story of unjust privilege accorded to celebrity and wealth, with Simpson back in the central role. This again is a frequent masterplot in American cultural life, though it is one that can be found in most cultures. In the Simpson trial, one of the more delicate challenges for the prosecution was figuring out how to cast as the central figure in this masterplot of unjust privilege a black man who grew up in a San Francisco ghetto.

Much of the power of these particular masterplots, as with so many, is their moral force. They create an image of the world in which good and evil are clearly identifiable, and in which blame can fall squarely on one party

of another. During the trial, lawyers for the defense and for the prosecution variously invoked these (and other) masterplots as they shaped their narrative renderings of this story of murder. To the degree that one or another of these masterplots tends to shape our view of the world, we may find it difficult to weigh the evidence dispassionately. Some would argue that our identities are so invested in our personal masterplots, that when these masterplots are activated it is impossible to break out of the vision they create. But, then, others argue that there are too many cases of people changing their minds in the face of the evidence to believe that we are quite so imprisoned.

### Types and genres

The concept of the masterplot is closely bound up with the concept of the type. A type is a recurring kind of character. Cinderella is both a type (embodied in the character of Cinderella) and a masterplot (her story). The battered wife is a type, and her story, with its repeated beatings, the alternating rages and repentances of her often alcoholic husband/lover (another type), is the masterplot. For a conclusion, this latter story has two current variants: her death at his hands and his death at hers. A masterplot comes equipped with types. When a type does not come to life in a narrative and we see the character only as a formula for a character, we call it a *stereotype*. The term is a good one. It comes from the history of newsprint and refers literally to a cast metal plate in which the print is fixed. When we see a stereotype in a narrative, we see something so fixed and predictable that it seems prefabricated. Masterplots can be rendered stereotypically as well. In such cases, all we see is the masterplot. The particular narrative in which it is conveyed brings little of interest to the story. But again we should note that we all differ in our responses to narrative. We all know intelligent people (including perhaps ourselves) who have been moved to tears by a narrative that for many other intelligent people is laughably stereotypical from beginning to end. This apparent failure of taste, or lack of sophistication, has a lot to do with masterplots and our personal vulnerability to some of them.

Another term closely related to masterplot is **genre**. A genre is a recurrent literary form. Epic and tragedy, for example, are narrative genres. There are many non-narrative genres as well (the sonnet, the expository essay). Genre, which comes from the French word for "kind," is a loose concept. It can apply to large categories like the novel (a very broad and inclusive narrative genre) and it can apply to subsets of these large categories, like the picaresque novel (the episodic adventures of a rascal, told in the first person) and the epistolary novel (narrated in letters). Moreover, a text can combine two or more genres.

Thus a novel, for example, can be both picaresque and epistolary. Sometimes, but not always, genres are closely bound up with certain masterplots. Perhaps the oldest and commonest example of this is the quest. It is a literary genre, but it is also a particular kind of masterplot. The genre of the novel, in contrast, carries with it no assumption that it will conform to any particular masterplot whatsoever.

### Narrative rhetoric at work

I described the O. J. Simpson trial as a contest of narratives in which the contestants draw on masterplots (among an arsenal of other rhetorical tools) to achieve the effect of normalization. This is invariably the case in legal trials, though courts of justice are not the only place that contests of narratives can be found. One finds them everywhere, from politics to family arguments. This is a subject I go into at length in Chapter Eleven. But sometimes one finds a contest of narratives carried on within a containing narrative. This can be a very effective tool in narrative's rhetorical repertoire, since in such cases the contest is often "no contest." After all, there is only one author running the show. This kind of managed contest is worth pausing to look at. Can you see the contest of narratives in the following news report? Who wins?

#### Khadafy Calls Confrontation with U.S. a Libyan Triumph

*New York Times News Service*  
TRIPOLI, Libya - Col. Moammar Khadafy claimed victory Friday night in his confrontation with the United States over the Gulf of Sidra.

In a rambling speech to a crowd of more than 1000 soldiers, sailors, Boy Scouts and party faithful bused in for the occasion, the Libyan leader repeatedly described the outcome of his showdown with the Sixth Fleet as "a triumph" . . . .

In his speech, Khadafy insisted that Libya had shot down three American fighter planes and that the Americans had sunk only a fishing boat. The United States has asserted that no planes were lost and

that two Libyan naval patrol boats were sunk.  
"The Americans are lying," he said. "They can't believe a small country could shoot down three planes. We shot down three planes, and the six fliers are being eaten by the fish in the Gulf of Sidra."

"America has gone mad in the past few days. They shot a fishing boat and claimed it was a warship."

A few minutes later, Khadafy asserted that an American helicopter had been allowed to cross the "line of death" to pick up a wounded flier and a body.

The colonel said that two American rockets had been fired at the Libyan missile site at Sidra but that

one had failed to explode. He said it was being given to the Russians, "so they can learn its secrets." . . .

The crowd Friday night, like others seen at rallies here in the last few days, was small and seemingly lacking in enthusiasm.

All those in the crowd appeared to be members of organized groups, paying little attention to the fiery oratory.<sup>8</sup>

Something happened in the Gulf of Sidra on 26 March 1986. There is a story here somewhere, though very few, if any, of us will ever have a narrative rendering of this story that can be fully confirmed. What we do have in this article is three narratives. There is the "official" US narrative account of the incident, which we glimpse only in one sentence of the third paragraph. There is Colonel Khadafy's narrative of the incident, rendered in "direct discourse" (in the words of the character Khadafy, who acts as a narrator within the piece). And there is the journalist's narrative, which both includes and exceeds the other two narratives. Let's look at the second and third of these.

Narrative Two. Before all else, we must acknowledge that this narrative is told not by the real, living Colonel Khadafy, but by a character, "Colonel Khadafy," within the article's larger narrative. Saying this is not to impugn the integrity of the *Times* reporter who filed the account but to acknowledge our first principle: that, insofar as it is narrated, any story is an act of mediation and construction, and this includes its characters. That said, we can see clearly here that the character/narrator "Khadafy" is working with the masterplot of David and Goliath: a small, struggling nation has taken on the most powerful nation on earth and with careful aim knocked three of its vaunted fighters out of the sky. Directly reinforcing the masterplot are two supplemental details: the Americans claimed to sink a warship but only sank a fishing boat, and the six fliers of the three downed planes are "being eaten by the fish in the Gulf of Sidra." Both incidents are unnecessary for the story (they are not *constituent events*), but "Khadafy" is moved to include them because they reinforce the David and Goliath reversal. Both attach an idea of smallness to the most powerful nation on earth, especially the image of mighty US pilots being eaten by little fish. Two other *supplementary events* provide indirect rhetorical support. Risking apparent contradiction, "Khadafy" states that an American helicopter had been allowed to "cross the 'line of death' to pick up a wounded flier and a body" and that an unexploded rocket had been forwarded to the Russians "so they can learn its secrets." However true or untrue these supplemental events may be,

they do their rhetorical work. The first expresses the compassion (moral largeness) of a small nation, and the second indicates that the small nation has large friends.

Narrative Three. The journalist's narrative works to undermine the orator's masterplot and to replace it with the ranting of a type: the tinpot dictator. As with "Khadafy's" narrative, here too the reigning motif is diminishment, though now working on "Khadafy" and effected largely through *setting*. In the last three paragraphs, the journalist sets in contrast to "Khadafy's" oratory the indifference of a small based-in crowd, "lacking in enthusiasm." Notice how the *setting* is in part made up of tiny supplemental narrative events: "Some people managed to slip away before the speech was finished, and on the edges of the crowd many smoked and chatted, paying little attention to the fiery oratory." In this way, the journalist's narrative shrinks "the Colonel" even as "the Colonel" seeks in his own narrative to shrink his enemy.

### Selection, too, is construction

To *New York Times* readers, the journalist's narrative probably has the greater texture of reality. And it may, in fact, be more accurate. But it is important to bear in mind that, as narrative, it is as constructed as the narrative "Khadafy" tells. The details we get, if not invented, are nonetheless chosen from a great number that were left out. They are privileged details that strongly color how we see the central figure in the journalist's story.

What this brief analysis shows is how multiple parts of a narrative contribute to its rhetorical effect. If you are not persuaded that in narrative every single thing signifies (as Barthes contends), you can still see from this analysis how minor details, parts that are quite unnecessary to the story — like *supplementary events* and the *setting* — can exert considerable rhetorical leverage on the way we read. It also shows how masterplots and types that an author shares with his or her audience are drawn on to establish the framework within which the narrative can be seen as credible. "Khadafy" selects a masterplot that plays to the powerful third-world desire that weakness on the global stage can prevail against the hegemonic strength of dominating nations. The journalist draws on a perhaps equally powerful desire among the *Times* readership to see the frightening figure of Khadafy as a clownish tyrant, ignored even in his own land.

### Selected secondary sources

Wayne Booth's landmark 1961 study, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, is almost equally a study of the rhetoric of narrative as it is found in novels. For an in-depth study of causality in narrative, see Brian Richardson's *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative*. Jonathan Culler develops the concept of "naturalization" in *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1975, pp. 134-60. Hayden White's books are an extended study of the ways in which historians have drawn upon narrative coherence and other devices of narrativity to convey the sense of historical plausibility. A good sampler of his work on the importance of narrative form in the representation of history, and the one of his many books I would recommend reading first, is *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. You might want to put beside White's work the psychologist Jerome Bruner's "The Narrative Construction of 'Reality'." A searching analysis of a masterplot (and implicit endorsement of my use of the term in this chapter) can be found in Peter Brooks's chapter, "Freud's masterplot: a model for narrative" in his *Reading for the Plot*. But masterplots frequently undergird literary, historical, and cultural studies. Variations on the Horatio Alger masterplot, for example, form the analytical spine of works like William A. Fahey's *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the American Dream* (New York: Crowell, 1973), Elizabeth Long's *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), and Jane Flax's recent study of the Clarence Thomas hearings, *The American Dream in Black and White* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

### Additional primary texts

Examples of narrative's power to account for things through its normalizing function are legion. It is, in fact, hard to think of narratives before this postmodern age that do *not* give a sense of causation. As I mentioned above, a common element in the narrativity of narrative is the sense of coherence, and particularly coherence that derives from a linear structure of cause and effect. One genre in which the normalizing function of narrative, including its structure of cause and effect, becomes especially intriguing is autobiography. Not infrequently an autobiography is a defense of an autobiographer who



has made some controversial life choice. When John Henry Newman left the Church of England and converted to Catholicism, he was accused of bad faith and hypocrisy. His defense of his action was an autobiography titled *Apologia pro Vita sua* (1864), the title of which means roughly, "a defense of his life." Exactly one hundred years later, Malcolm X did much the same thing when he found himself in a similar situation after leaving the Nation of Islam. Defending himself meant laying out the stages of his life in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964) to show how they followed each other in an understandable causal sequence. A wonderfully comic fictional treatment of narrative's rhetoric of normalizing and explaining can be found in Eudora Welty's short story "Why I Live at the P. O." (1939). Finally, much absurdist fiction draws on reader expectations of the normalizing function to do just the reverse. In its first sentence, Franz Kafka's famous tale "The Metamorphosis" (1915) hits the reader with a puzzle that is never explained: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect."<sup>9</sup> Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951) renders profoundly mysterious the whole question of cause – why we do what we do, including writing about why we do what we do – in back to back fictional autobiographies.

Just as most narratives of any length work with our expectations of causal order, so too do they work either with or against masterplots. Children's literature is crowded with variations on the story that success crowns hard work, beginning with "The Little Engine that Could" and "Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel." The more specific version of this, the Horatio Alger story, not only has its numerous variants in American popular literature, but also stinging critiques that take the story and drive it to a tragic or farcical end. F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), is a devastating exposé of the masterplot's mythic status in American culture, as are two landmark novels by African-American authors: Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). As always, it is worth keeping in mind that any work that goes beyond stereotype is going to impress its individual differences on the masterplots it recreates in its narrative discourse.

## Chapter 5

# Closure

### Conflict: the agon

If, with its immense rhetorical resources, narrative is an instrument of power, it is often about power as well. This is because, in almost every narrative of any interest, there is a conflict in which power is at stake. You might say that conflict structures narrative. The ancient Greek word for conflict (actually "contest" is closer) is *agon*, and how the agon played out formed the spine of any Greek tragedy. The presence on stage of a chorus reinforced awareness of the agon as the chorus debated with itself during the course of the play, one side of the chorus pitted against the other (Woody Allen richly satirized the role of the chorus in his *Mighty Aphrodite* [1995]). Characters in the narrative of Greek tragedy were assigned roles in the agon. Thus, there was a "protagonist" (hero) and an "antagonist" (the hero's chief opponent). Conflict in narrative, of course, does not necessarily take the form of a clear opposition of good guys and bad guys (though this is one defining feature of *melodrama*). And in many narratives, there is more than one conflict at play.

The agon, or conflict, has been so central a feature of narrative throughout its recorded history that it is reasonable to assume that it serves important cultural purposes. One very plausible possibility is that the representation of conflict in narrative provides a way for a culture to talk to itself about, and possibly resolve, conflicts that threaten to fracture it (or at least make living difficult). In this view of narrative, its conflicts are not solely about particular characters (or entities). Also in conflict, and riding on top of the conflict of narrative entities, are conflicts regarding values, ideas, feelings, and ways of seeing the world. There is, of course, no culture without many such conflicts. Narrative may, then, play an important social role as a vehicle for making the case for one side or another in a conflict, or for negotiating the claims of the opposing sides, or simply for providing a way for people to live with a conflict that is irreconcilable (as, for example, the conflict between the desire to live and the knowledge that we have to die). *Hamlet*, for example, features a set of conflicts between certain characters – Hamlet and his mother, Hamlet and his uncle, Hamlet and

Ophelia, Hamlet and Laertes – but it also deals with a complex set of cultural conflicts centered on the issue of revenge. In Chapter Twelve, I will take up this idea of a culture using narrative as an instrument to think about difficult issues. In this chapter, I want to focus more narrowly on the rhetorical impact of both the presence and the absence of closure in narrative.

## Closure and endings

When a narrative resolves a conflict, it achieves closure, and this usually comes at the end of the narrative. We expect stories to end. We talk about good and bad, satisfying and unsatisfying endings. There are, for example, stories that snap shut at the end.

### Taboo

His guardian Angel whispered to Fabian, behind his shoulder:

“Careful, Fabian! It is decreed that you will die the minute you pronounce the word *doyen*.”

“Doyen?” asks Fabian, intrigued.

And he dies.<sup>1</sup>

In this very short story, the conflict between an implacable decree and the unthinking wonderment of youth is resolved decisively when the fulfillment of the decree coincides with the last word of the narrative. Here’s another:

### Bedtime Story

“Careful, honey, it’s loaded,” he said, re-entering the bedroom.

Her back rested against the headboard. “This for your wife?”

“No. Too chancy. I’m hiring a professional.”

“How about me?”

He smirked. “Cute. But who’d be dumb enough to hire a lady hit man?”

She wet her lips, sighing along the barrel. “Your wife.”<sup>2</sup>

These are rather wonderful narratives, and certainly one of the things (if not *the thing*) that makes them work so well is how decisively they end. In each there is a clear (though not necessarily simple) conflict which is resolved emphatically with the final words of the narrative.

But closure does not have to come at the end of a narrative; in fact, it does not have to come at all. So it is important to keep the two concepts – the ending and closure – distinct.

## Must narratives end?

Aristotle wrote that the well-made tragedy has a beginning, a middle, and an end. But this was an evaluation rather than a definition. Soap operas, by contrast, can go on forever. Some sagas, myth cycles, comic strips, TV series seem also to have no proper end. And the phenomenon of the “prequel” (the opposite of the sequel) suggests that even beginnings are not sacred, but can be pushed back endlessly into the past. Much as we, like Aristotle, want shape in our narratives we seem also frequently content with postponing the end – and therefore some final perception of narrative shape – indefinitely.

## Closure, suspense, and surprise

The term “closure” can refer to more than the resolution of a story’s central conflict. It has to do with a broad range of expectations and uncertainties that arise during the course of a narrative and that part of us, at least, hopes to resolve, or close. Closure is therefore best understood as something we look for in narrative, a desire that authors understand and often expend considerable art to satisfy or to frustrate. If the object is to satisfy this desire – which is often the case – it can’t be satisfied too quickly, because we seem also to enjoy being in the state of imbalance or tension that precedes closure. In fact, narrative is marked almost everywhere by its *lack of closure*. Commonly called *suspense*, this lack is one of the two things that above everything else give narrative its life. The other thing is *surprise*. All successful narratives of any length are chains of suspense and surprise that keep us in a fluctuating state of impatience, wonderment, and partial gratification. We are held this way until the final moment of closure, though there are also instances, and not infrequently, when a narrative will fail to close altogether. And this, too, can have its satisfactions.

*Decoding narrative*. It will help at this point to refer to Roland Barthes’s argument in his book *S/Z* that, just as we bring to a sentence a complex set of linguistic codes by which we understand it, so we bring to any readable narrative a set of narrative codes. These codes are necessary, not just to make sense of the narrative, but to extract meaning from it. He argues that there are five fundamental codes that author and reader share in order to make a narrative readable. Two of these codes that are especially applicable to us here are what Barthes called the “proairetic code” – having to do with expectations and actions – and what he called the “hermeneutic code” – having to do with questions and answers. In these two codes, Barthes referred

was certainly well born, unlike his wicked sibling). That version held the English stage for the next 160 years. Purists may object that this ruined the tragedy, but then Shakespeare could be said to have "ruined" Geoffrey of Monmouth's *King Lear* when he decided to kill both Lear and Cordelia.

With regard to expectations, then, there appear to be two imperfectly balanced needs: on the one hand to see them fulfilled, on the other to see them violated. When, at the end of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), Kim Novak falls for real from the mission tower, the audience's lingering expectations that it is watching one kind of romantic thriller – the kind with a happy ending – are rudely violated with a closure that retroactively instates a much darker genre. For some, this makes the film a hard one to see twice; for others, it is a stroke of genius. The extraordinary Dutch film, *The Vanishing* (1988), cast as a romantic quest to rescue a kidnapped lover, sickeningly violates expectations when the hero is buried alive at the end. Difficult as the film is to watch, however, the conclusion can be seen to be in accord with the dark moral obsession of the hero's deeply disturbed killer. In both of these films (at least for those for whom they work), the surprise of the conclusion casts a light backward over the whole film, giving it a new shape and tone as the sense of surprise wears away and the ending is seen to fit.

Certainly the key to suspense is the possibility, at least, that things could turn out differently. And surprise, which is such a common feature of successful narrative, is what happens when, to a degree, things do turn out differently. But for any audience there is a range of what they will tolerate in the way of surprise. When the same director (George Sluizer) remade *The Vanishing* for Hollywood in 1993, the producers gambled that a large American audience would not tolerate the original ending. Such at least was Hollywood's assessment when they gave it a happy ending, but the remake was not a box-office hit either. Meanwhile, *Vertigo*, which also did poorly when it was released, has aged into a classic and for some is Hitchcock's masterpiece.

So it is important to note that words like "code" and "formula" may work in describing how expectations are aroused, but they fail when applied to narrative itself. Codes and formulas thrive on their inflexibility. Because the Morse Code is always dependably unchanging, it could be relied on in the days of telegraphy. Likewise, the formula for methyl alcohol can be depended on so long as it stays the same. Change it ever so slightly and you've got a formula for something else. Were narrative to operate in the same way, we would have nothing but stereotypes and wooden clichés for our literature. Indeed, one could argue that, for there to be any kind of success in narrative, the codes and formulas that go into it have to be sufficiently flexible to permit all kinds of variation in the details. This would include not just variation in the things inessential to the story (*setting, supplementary events*) but variations in treating the story's *constituent events* as well. So Barthes was describing not

can change with easy formula

to the ways in which narratives arouse both expectations and questions, and then either give us satisfaction or frustrate us. This is where the presence or absence of closure comes in. If expectations are fulfilled or questions answered, we say that closure occurs. Adapting Barthes, we can identify two important levels at which suspense and closure occur in narrative: the level of expectations and the level of questions.

### Closure at the level of expectations

At the level of expectations we recognize, by numerous signals, the kind of action or sequence of events that we are reading (revenge, falling in love, escape, murder, a bad dream). Once actions start in a certain way, we expect what follows to be consistent with the overall code. When a beautiful young woman like Cinderella meets a handsome young prince, we expect falling in love to follow. Moreover, we see these two successive events as one part of an overall sequence of events, a *genre*, which in common language is called "romance" and which often but not always closes with marriage. It may seem coldly inappropriate to speak of such an event involving such lovely people as part of a code, but it is nonetheless true that we learn at a very early age to read and decode not just words but whole patterns like the genre of romance. This is another way to look at masterplots: as coded narrative formulas that end with closure. When the beautiful young woman is relocated from romance to the genre of tragedy, as Cordelia is in *King Lear*, we expect a very different kind of closure from romance. Depending on her role in the tragedy, we might well expect the worst. When at the end, Lear finds Cordelia dead in her cell and then dies himself, painful as this is, it fulfills expectations that have been built into the play. You could call it a painful satisfaction.

At least these expectations seem to be "built in" to the play, especially to modern viewers of *Lear* who come to the play for the first time, having heard what a bleak tragedy it is. But half of what gives life to expectations in narrative is their violation, for which the common word again is *surprise*. Conversely, directors, screen-adapters, audiences themselves, can force a story to conform to expectations. After all, the earliest version we have of Shakespeare's *Lear* does not refer to itself as a tragedy. And renaissance audiences, familiar with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *King Lear*, would have fully expected both Lear and Cordelia to live. So Shakespeare surprised his audience with his version of the story in a way that we can't be surprised since we are so familiar with the tragic version. Later, in 1681, Nahum Tate rewrote the conclusion of *King Lear*, not only saving Cordelia's life but also marrying her off to Edgar (who may not have been a prince but

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how a narrative necessarily should turn out but what we expect as we read or watch. And, of course, without expectations in the first place we could not appreciate the variations. Yet this brings up a further difficulty with the word "code," since one of our expectations in almost all narratives of any complexity, is that our expectations will turn out to have been anywhere from inadequate to completely wrong. We expect, in short, to be surprised. This is still a dark area in the study of cognition, so in this book, I have avoided the connotations of "code" by using the word "level," as in the phrase "level of expectations."

### Chekhov's famous advice

Chekhov told an aspiring writer: "If in the first chapter you say that a gun hung on the wall, in the second, or third chapter it must without fail be discharged."<sup>3</sup> This is a famous piece of advice and it has been repeated in many different versions ever since. But it is worth distinguishing between two ideas that are packed into this statement: first, that the mere presence of a gun arouses expectations that it will be used and, second, that an author must fulfill those expectations. The first is probably quite right, but the second seems to be a pretty mechanical rule. In fairness to Chekhov, he may have been overstating to make the point that authors must include only those elements in their stories that contribute to the overall affect ("Everything that has no direct relation to the story must be ruthlessly thrown away"). But certainly one can think of all kinds of ways that a gun introduced in Chapter One might never go off, and with great success. There could be, for example, a prolonged struggle at the end of which we discover that the gun isn't loaded, or, after many threats to shoot, a desperate would-be assassin throws the gun out of the window, or the gun produces a little flag with the word "Bang!" written on it, or it turns out to be a chocolate gun and is eaten after the quarreling lovers kiss and make up. So, yes, "discharging" is certainly something that a gun stands for in our minds, since we know that discharging is what a gun are made to do. But narrative can succeed in many ways, not just by delaying the discharge (suspense) but by happily frustrating it altogether (surprise).

### Closure at the level of questions

If at the level of expectations we anticipate what will happen, at the level of questions we anticipate enlightenment. These two may look alike and they

may work very closely together. But they are also opposite. At the level of expectations, we lay down tracks in our mind for the ways in which the action will develop. These can be short little tracks for small pieces of action (now she is going shopping, now they are going to fall in love) or long tracks of genres and masterplots (this is a tragic story and it will close with the death of the protagonist). We can be surprised when our expectations are not fulfilled, but then usually, if the narrative isn't over yet, new expectations rush in on new tracks. Finally, as we saw with regard to *Ferigo* and the original *Fanshing*, a surprise at the conclusion can, if it works, reveal retrospectively tracks running through the narrative that we had not fully picked up on.

At the level of questions, we seek enlightenment. Who did it? Who killed Councilman Stubbs? At the level of expectations, we recognize that we are heading into the investigation of a crime and we expect that it will end with a revelation of the murderer. But at the level of questions, we want to know who did it. This is another kind of suspense in narrative. The level of questions is also a level of answers. Just as there can be a steady stream of questions, so too there can be a steady stream of answers. These answers may not be the right answers. They could be red herrings — a likely murderer but not the real one — as is frequently the case over the course of a mystery. Or they may be partial answers. But this thread of information (and disinformation) keeps us going until the narrative (in most cases) provides the answer and closure comes. A mystery story is only the most obvious genre in which the level of questions is activated. In reality, that level is activated in all narratives, and right from page one, or scene one, or shot one. Where are we? What's going on? Who are these people? What is their relationship? What do they want? But there are also larger questions that frequently come into play. In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, large questions are pursued throughout the novel's 900 pages in a running debate that weaves in and out of the story's events. The most pressing of these questions is whether or not, in the cosmic scheme, anything and everything is permitted (even murder).

### The absence of closure

Critics disagree about whether this question is answered by the time you have come to the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*. But the fact that closure does not have to happen in narrative makes it especially important to keep closure separate from the formal concept of an ending. Here, for example, is a short, fascinating narrative by Franz Kafka that ends quite emphatically but does not close the questions that it raises.

### A Common Confusion

A common experience, resulting in a common confusion. A has to transact important business with B in H. He goes to H for a preliminary interview, accomplishes the journey there in ten minutes, and the journey back in the same time, and on returning boasts to his family of his expedition. Next day he goes again to H, this time to settle his business finally. As that by all appearances will require several hours, A leaves very early in the morning. But although all the surrounding circumstances, at least in A's estimation, are exactly the same as the day before, this time it takes him ten hours to reach H. When he arrives there quite exhausted in the evening he is informed that B, annoyed at his absence, had left half an hour before to go to A's village, and that they must have passed each other on the road. A is advised to wait. But in his anxiety about his business he sets off at once and hurries home.

This time he covers the distance, without paying any particular attention to the fact, practically in an instant. At home he learns that B had arrived quite early, immediately after A's departure, indeed that he had met A on the threshold and reminded him of his business; but A had replied that he had no time to spare, he must go at once.

In spite of this incomprehensible behavior of A, however, B had stayed on to wait for A's return. It is true, he had asked several times whether A was not back yet, but he was still sitting up in A's room. Overjoyed at the opportunity of seeing B at once and explaining everything to him, A rushes upstairs. He is almost at the top, when he stumbles, twists a sinew, and almost fainting with the pain, incapable even of uttering a cry, only able to moan faintly in the darkness, he hears B – impossible to tell whether at a great distance or quite near him – stamping down the stairs in a violent rage and vanishing for good.<sup>4</sup>

What closes here is the sequence of action. By mid-narrative, we have enough cues to recognize that this is a world of nightmare and to anticipate that, accordingly, things are not going to turn out well for A. Readers familiar with Kafka might guess this from the author's name alone. Sure enough, the chain of frustration and failure achieves closure with the angry departure of B and the despair of A. But along the way, all kinds of questions (with competing possible answers) have been raised in the reader's mind. Who are these people? What business do they have with each other? Is there more to this relationship? Why is the trip sometimes hard and sometimes easy? Why did A not recognize that B had arrived at his own house? Why can't A cry out? And how on earth, to go back to the title, is this a "common confusion"? The ending not only fails to close these questions, but opens them up even wider.

Kafka is an extreme example. In his world, little is ever known for sure, though some would argue that, at least on the level of metaphysical wonderment ("What are we here on earth for?", "Who is in charge?", "Why

is there needless suffering?", "Why do we often feel guilty for no reason?"), the lack of closure in a Kafka narrative is an accurate representation of our general condition on this planet. But there are also those who argue that *any* truly valuable narrative is "open" to some degree. *King Lear* may close with tragic finality at the level of expectations, but some of the issues raised during the course of the play are left open at the end. For example, at one point, Gloucester in despair says,

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,  
They kill us for their sport. (IV, I, 38–39)

And though there is much in the narrative to support this view, the issue of whether or not any being or beings control our fates and, if so, whether they "sport" with us in this cruel way seems to remain permanently open by the end of the play. And this openness is not necessarily a bad thing. By not closing, the plays of Shakespeare, like so many other powerful narratives, don't tell us what to think but cause us to think. Narrative as such, to borrow a line from I. A. Richards, is a "machine to think with."<sup>5</sup> Conversely, we tend to think of narratives that close the issues they raise, or at least close them too easily, like satire or children's fables, as lesser works, with modes like advertising and propaganda, which seek to close unequivocally, somewhere near the bottom. But this raises in turn yet another vexed issue. Is there something necessarily wrong or inferior about a narrative that closes with moral clarity? Conversely, isn't it an easy thing to build confusion into one's narrative? In short, the presence or absence of closure by itself can not be taken as a standard of narrative failure or success.

### The peril of buying a story

Stockbrokers sometimes talk about clients who make the mistake of buying a story rather than a stock. These are people who hold on to dead or moribund stocks because they have become caught up in the story of the stock. What such people want is for this story to close in the right way, with a recovery and eventual ascent to the point where the buyer makes a profit. So strong is this investment in the story of the stock that the investor forgets where her or his best interest lies (e.g., abandoning the story of the stock and investing the money in securities that show promise).

What we can say is that closure is something we tend to look for in narratives. We look for it in the same way that we look for answers to questions or fulfillment to expectations. This would appear to be a natural human

inclination. For this reason, the promise of closure has great rhetorical power in narrative. Closure brings satisfaction to desire, relief to suspense, and clarity to confusion. It normalizes. It confirms the masterplot. At the same time, we don't want closure too quickly. We seem to like the experience of remaining in doubt while moving toward closure. But even as I write this, I have to stop and remind myself that "we" refers to an immense number of very different people. Some of us demand closure and have little tolerance for narratives that don't provide it. Others prefer Kafka. Most of us have a broad range of narrative tastes, depending on our moods. If I pick up a mystery to read on the plane, chances are I am going to be disappointed if I don't eventually learn who killed Councilman Stubbs. But then, to complicate matters even further, some of us can find closure where others cannot. In other words, we read in different ways. So far we have been discussing the rhetorical power of narrative, but power also resides in the reader. We will take up this subject in Chapter Seven when we directly address the issue of **interpretation**. But before we get there, we need to look at yet another set of considerations that seem to be part of the text (what some call "formal" considerations) having to do with **narration**, that is, "the *telling* of a story."

### Recommended secondary reading

There are a number of good works devoted to the subject of closure in narrative. Among these are Mariana Torgovnick's *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton University Press, 1981), David H. Richter's *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction* (University of Chicago Press, 1974), and Russell J. Reising's, *Loose Ends: Closure and Crisis in the American Social Text* (Duke University Press, 1996). A major work on the general human tendency to project a cosmic masterplot with satisfying closure at its end is Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*. My distinction between closure (or the lack of it) at the level of expectations and closure at the level of questions is indebted to Roland Barthes's brilliant anatomy of how we read narrative, *S/Z: A good book on suspense in narrative* is Eric Rabkin's *Narrative Suspense*.

### Additional primary texts

There is hardly a narrative that is not powered by a story of conflict, and there are numerous longer works – notably among nineteenth-century French and English novels – that feature several conflicts, often in progress over the same story time. The first two-thirds of the English nineteenth century also saw the production

of many novels – by Austen, Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Trollope and others – in which it appears by the end of the novel that the *implied author* is seeking closure not only on the level of expectations but on the level of questions as well. In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, these same novels – among them *Emma* (Austen, 1816), *David Copperfield* (Dickens, 1849/50), *The Moonstone* (Collins, 1868), *The Eustace Diamonds* (Trollope, 1873) – were opened up in readings by a whole range of critics who, despite their differences, were intent on refuting easy assumptions about the kind of wisdom that such novels communicate. This latter day attention to complexity and ambiguity seems to have flowed in the wake of the energetic experimentalism of twentieth-century writers, many of whom were determined to frustrate the quest for closure. Among these are André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* (1925), Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1952), Alain Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth* (1959), Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and Michael Joyce's hypertext novel *Afternoon: a Story* (1987/93). Among the narratives that I personally have found most challenging with regard to the question of closure, because they seem capable of yielding strongly built, yet conflicting, interpretations, are Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1849), Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1863), Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* (1898), Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and John Guare's play and film, *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990/93). There are many more.

In this chapter, I have tended to stress problems at the level of questions, but there are certainly examples of authorial challenge at the level of expectations. The best, I think, is *Great Expectations* (1860/61), for which Dickens wrote two quite different conclusions. The first satisfied Dickens's own sense of what the novel has led us to expect; in it, Pip and Estella part without marrying. The other is the one that Bulwer-Lytton persuaded Dickens was the only one his readership would accept; in it, Pip sees "no shadow of another parting" from Estella.