

PLOT THEORY AND CREATIVE WRITING: MANIPULATING READERS' DESIRE AND EXPECTATION

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ABSTRACT

The meaning and function of plot in narrative texts is thoroughly examined in contemporary literary and critical theory, having been also discussed in classical Greek and Roman works of criticism. A recurrent matter of interest in plot –reflected also in creative writing handbooks– is its relation to story, as plot is usually described as the chrono-logical and causal arrangement of the fictional characters' actions and narrative events. This paper attempts to introduce students of creative writing to the concept of plot, providing a concise presentation of some of the main theoretical approaches to it from different, yet closely linked, aspects: as a fixed structure or design, as a dynamic process of evolving structuration and, moreover, as manipulation of readers' desire and expectation, which permeates, as it is argued, the different ways of conceptualizing plot.

KEYWORDS: plot theory, creative writing, narratology, literary theory

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental issues that draw the immediate attention of students and teachers of creative writing courses is that of *plot*, which is considered to give writers “more concern than any other” (Bulman, 2008, p. 165). This might be attributed to the fact that there is no generally accepted definition of plot, being “one of the most elusive terms in narrative theory”, despite its seeming simplicity of reference (Dannenberg, 2010, p. 435). As a result, one may come across a quite extensive bibliography on the issue of plot in studies in narratology and in the field of creative writing. Creative writing scholars and practitioners, in particular, among them established authors, provide their insight into plot construction, together with practical advice for prospective writers, in order to craft compelling storylines, harness conflict and suspense, arouse readers' interests, elicit emotional responses, etc. (eg. Bell, 2004, 2011; Cowgill, 2008; Dibell, 1999; Kress, 1999; Sykes, 2013).¹

The concept and the function of plot in narrative texts has been thoroughly studied in modern literary and critical theory from the beginning of the 20th century until recently, and has been also discussed

¹ It has to be noted, however, that many writers express their hesitation about such a predilection with plot. Stephen King, for instance, claims: “I distrust plot for two reasons: first, because our lives are largely plotless, even when you add in all our reasonable precautions and careful planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible” (King, 2000, p. 163).

in classical Greek and Roman criticism. A recurrent matter of interest in this matter –reflected also in creative writing handbooks– is plot’s relation to the *story*, as plot is usually described as the narrative arrangement of the characters’ actions or events of the story. In this vein, drawing on novelist E. M. Forster, story and plot are time and again defined in the framework of the often-quoted excerpt of his book *Aspects of the Novel* (1927):

We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. “The king died and then the queen died” is a story. “The king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: “The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.” This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say “and then?” If it is in a plot we ask “why?” That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by “and then—and then” They can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also. (Forster, 1985, p. 86)

What is given prominence to in the above definition is that the structure of the narrative events, when emplotted, rely on *causality*; emphasis is laid on the “why” over the “what (happens next)” as far as the actions of the characters are concerned. The reader, connecting –by means of his/her intelligence and memory– events read on previous pages with current ones, seeks clues, explanations, chains of cause and effect, or “true meanings”, in an attempt to solve the “mystery” that is essential to any plot. The elements of *surprise* and *mystery* are in fact, to Forster’s mind, of pivotal importance and occur through a suspension of the time-sequence. Such manipulations of the time sequence, as flash-backs and foreshadows, serve to add mystery and produce surprising effects to the reader.²

According to Kukkonen (2014, para. 1), there may be distinguished three main ways of conceptualizing plot: “(1) *Plot as a fixed, global structure*. The configuration of the arrangement of all story events, from beginning, middle to end, is considered. (2a) *Plot as progressive structuration*. The connections between story events, motivations and consequences as readers perceive them are considered. (2b) *Plot as part of the authorial design*. The author’s way of structuring the narrative to achieve particular effects is considered.” To our mind, however, plot as part of the authorial design (2b) cannot be separated from either its notion as a global structure (1) or as progressive structuration (2a); rather, it is authorial design that determines both, and simultaneously it is through both that

² Cf. Forster (1985, p. 96): “The plot, then, is the novel in its logical intellectual aspect: it requires mystery, but the mysteries are solved later on: the reader may be moving about in worlds unrealized, but the novelist has no misgivings. He is competent, poised above his work, throwing a beam of light here, popping on a cap of invisibility there, and (*qua* plot-maker) continually negotiating with himself *qua* character-monger as to the best effect to be produced. He plans his book beforehand: or anyhow he stands above it, his interest in cause and effect give him an air of predetermination”.

assumptions about authorial intention may be made by the reader. Both dimensions of plot are thus considered to be linked to *authorial intention* (as to the meaning to be conveyed, the attraction of readers' interest in the narrative, the keeping of their attention, etc.) and to *readerly (pre)conceptions about plot*, in terms of generic expectations and presumptions about authorial intention. In following, therefore, in an attempt to introduce students of creative writing to the concept of plot, we will provide a concise, yet comprehensive, presentation of some fundamental theoretical approaches to it, in the dimensions mentioned above (*plot as a fixed structure/global arrangement*, and *plot as a dynamic process/evolving structuration*), but consider, moreover, two interrelated notions, *desire* and *expectation*, that arguably permeate both aspects of plot.

2. Plot as a fixed structure

Conceptualizing plot as a fixed structure (macro-structure) relies on a broader monitoring of the narrative on the part of both author and reader; it is based, that is, on a sight of the “wider picture” of the work, offered only after the completion of its composition and reading. Before that, the reader can only presume such a structure or make conjectures about it, while the author can only continue designing and configuring it. In such an approach, Aristotle's *Poetics*' description of plot (*mythos*) as the particular order and arrangement of events, real or imagined, and as the representation of a complete action (a unified whole), which has a *beginning*, a *middle*, and an *end*, continues to exert a large influence. Tragedies, in specific, which are his main interest, according to Aristotle, comprise two parts: *complication (desis*, tying, binding) and *unraveling* (lysis, solution): “Every tragedy falls into two parts, - Complication and Unravelling or Denouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the Complication; the rest is the Unravelling. By the Complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune. The Unravelling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1455b.18, transl. S. H. Butcher). As far as comedies are concerned –still in classical literary criticism– four parts are usually distinguished: *prologue* (the preface, where something about the poet, the piece or the actor may be said), *protasis* (the first act and the beginning of the drama), *epitasis* (the increase, the progress of the disturbance and the node of the confusion), *catastrophe* (the change of the situation to a pleasant outcome, made clear by the knowledge of what has happened) (Antiphanes, fr. 191, Evanthius, *De fabula* IV.5). The well-known Freytag's pyramid, very often deployed in creative writing courses to describe plot, also refers to dramatic plays, identifying in them five parts.³ In specific, there is the introduction (*Einleitung*), the rise (*Steigerung*), the climax (*Höhepunkt*), the return or fall (*Fall oder Umkehr*), and the catastrophe (*Katastrophe*) (Freytag & MacEwan, 2013).

³ Cf. Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 189-190: “Let no play be either shorter or longer than five acts, if when once seen it hopes to be called for and brought back to the stage” (transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough).

Although the above descriptions of plot parts refer mainly to dramatic plays, they have been deployed in the study of narrative, in general.⁴ Other approaches of describing the basic structure of narrative plot include that of Tomashevsky, who identifies the *exposition* (the narrative introduction to the initial situation), *Spannung*, and the *ending*, or the *thesis* (the exciting force), the *antithesis* (the climax) and the *synthesis* (the ending) (Tomashevsky, 1965). Similarly, according to Todorov (1969, 1977), the minimal complete plot is a shift from an “equilibrium” to an “imbalance” to the establishment of a “new equilibrium”.

Within such broader parts of the plot, what has been also thoroughly examined is the sequence of narrative events and the way they are interconnected. Thus, at various points in the plot, typical narrative sequences of events or actions of the characters were identified (e.g., position-opposition-composition, conflict-reconciliation, upset-balance-restoration, rule-violation-punishment, dilemma-selection, etc.). Moreover, for the Formalists, plot (*sujet/siuzhet/syuzhet*) is the artistic de-formation and re-formation of real-life event sequences that comprise a story (*fabula*). As artistry for them is linked to the purpose of defamiliarization, plot is viewed as an intentional distortion of story in the process of its narration, a “disarrangement” of the “natural” sequence of events. In Shklovsky’s words (1990, p. 170), “The concept of plot (*syuzhet*) is too often confused with a description of the events in the novel, with what I’d tentatively call the story line (*fabula*). As a matter of fact, though, the story line is nothing more than material for plot formation. [...] The forms of art are explained by the artistic laws that govern them and not by comparisons with actual life. In order to impede the action of the novel, the artist resorts not to witches and magic potions but to a simple transposition of its parts. He thereby reveals to us the aesthetic laws that underlie both of these compositional devices.”

Tomashevsky (1965) also emphasizes that stories consist of events that are linked with causal-temporal relationships, but in the plot the same events are arranged differently. As he explains, “Mutually related motifs form the thematic bonds of the work. From this point of view, the story is the aggregate of motifs in their logical, causal-chronological order; the plot is the aggregate of those same motifs but having the relevance and the order which they had in the original work. The place in the work in which the reader learns of an event, whether the information is given by the author, or by a character, or by a series of indirect hints—all this is irrelevant to the story. But the aesthetic function of the plot is

⁴ Freytag’s terms are often translated in English (and commonly used in criticism) as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, denouement/resolution. Creative writing handbooks, drawing on literary theory and criticism, either adopt Freytag’s five-part plot, add more parts, leading, for instance, to seven-part plots (exposition, complication, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, denouement) or simplify it into a three-part design, following the Aristotelian schema (beginning, middle, end). Moreover, different types of plots are recognized, such as progressive plot (with a linear structure), episodic plot, parallel plot (a main plot and sub-plots), concentric-circle plot, etc. As far as sub(sidiary) plots are concerned, within a larger narrative (e.g., novel), they often have the same structure as the main plot, supplementing or contrasting it. According to Shen (2013), in some narratives behind the main plot development there exists a hidden, parallel textual movement, conveying a different, often ironic, thematic import.

precisely this bringing of an arrangement of motifs to the attention of the reader. Real incidents, not fictionalized by an author, may make a story. A plot is wholly an artistic creation (Tomashevsky, 1965, p. 68). Consequently, from the formalist point of view, plot is a recombination of story event, comprising interruptions, retardations, deviations, surprises, transpositions, repetitions, and other such violations of the logic of the story, in order to increase readerly tension, emancipating readers from the automatized effects of everyday life (Kalinin, 2018, p. 46). In other words, plot is “story made difficult”.

The above binary opposition was accepted, generally, in structuralist theory and criticism (e.g., *récit/narration*, Barthes, 2013; *histoire/discours*, Todorov, 1980; *narrated order (story line)/narrating order (plot)*, Prince, 1982, p. 49).⁵ In Chatman’s words (1978, p. 19), “structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*”.⁶ There have also been proposed three-tier models, such as Genette’s (1980) distinction between *histoire* (the narrative content, the “signified”, in Saussure’s terms), *récit* (the discourse, the narrative text, the “signifier”, in Saussure’s terms) and *narration* (the narrative act of the narrator, that produces the text).⁷ A three-layer distinction between *narrative text*, *story*, and *fabula* is also accepted by Bal, although defined differently: “a *narrative text* is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (“tells” the reader, viewer, or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and “colouring” of a *fabula*. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (Bal, 2017, p. 5). Finally, Schmid’s (2010) four narrative tiers are worth mentioning: “happenings” (*Geschehen*), “story” (*Geschichte*), “narrative” (*Erzählung*) and “presentation of the narrative” (*Präsentation der*

⁵ Although such two-layered models seem to reiterate formalists’ distinction between *fabula* and *sujet*, in fact they are approached differently as to their meaning, operation and literary/artistic importance (Schmid, 2010, pp. 186-187).

⁶ Chatman (1978, p. 48) identifies two types of narrative plots: a) the traditional “plot of resolution”, where the development resides in a sense of problem-solving and the events are resolved happily or not; and b) the modern “plot of revelation”, in which things remain more or less the same and the emphasis falls on revealing a certain state of affairs.

⁷ Cf. Rimmon-Kenan (2002, p. 3): “‘Story’ designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events. Whereas ‘story’ is a succession of events, ‘text’ is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling. Put more simply, the text is what we read. In it, the events do not necessarily appear in chronological order, the characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through some prism or perspective (‘focalizer’). Since the text is a spoken or written discourse, it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or process of production is the third aspect – ‘narration’. Narration can be considered as both real and fictional. In the empirical world, the author is the agent responsible for the production of the narrative and for its communication”. Fludernik (2009, pp. 4-7) uses the terms *fable (story, the “subject matter” of the narrative)*, the realization of that subject matter at the level of the *plot (plot level or fictional world)* and the *narrative text or discourse*. “From the text the reader constructs the underlying world and *story* or action structure (also called the *plot*), which is a manifestation of the fable or network of motifs of the story” (Fludernik, 2009, p. 7).

Erzählung). According to him (Schmid, 2010, pp. 190-192), “the happenings are the amorphous entirety of situations, characters and actions explicitly or implicitly represented, or logically implied, in the narrative work”, a continuum that is spatially and temporally unlimited, although esthetically relevant, as the result of artistic invention. “The story is the result of a selection from the happenings” (selection of elements, i.e. situations, characters, and actions, and the specific properties/qualifications of these elements, which are explicitly represented in the text). “The narrative is the result of composition” (that is *linearization* of things occurring simultaneously in the story, and *reorganization* of the segments of the story). Finally, “the presentation of the narrative is formed by the phenotypic tier”, the only tier available for empirical observation (the “verbalization” of literary narration). As it is obvious in Schmid’s model, plot is not only a result of re-ordering some happenings (e.g., as to narrative order and duration of events), but also of *inventing* them, *selecting* elements and their qualities, *organizing* them, etc., so as to construct a coherent narrative world that conforms to the specific authorial intention, in the framework of the literary communication.⁸

In the formalistic-structuralist tradition, in general, a distinction is made between the “natural” order of events and the “artificial” or “artistic” one (cf. *ordo naturalis* and *ordo artificialis* in classical literary criticism and rhetoric, Prill, 1987). Theorists and critics working in this model, influenced considerably by Propp’s analysis of the folktale (events, actors, functions, spheres of action, sequences etc., Propp, 2003), as well as Levi-Strauss’ analysis of the structure of the Oedipus myth (Levi-Strauss, 1955), attempted to define a “grammar” or “syntax” of such narrative macro-structures. This approach to narrative underlies, in fact, the attempt to develop typologies of plots, in terms of recurrent patterns, themes, outcomes, genres, effects on reader, and ideological/political implications. Crane, for instance, in his well-known essay “The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones” (1952), argues that the plot of any novel or drama is “the particular temporal synthesis affected by the writer of the elements of action, character, and thought that constitute the matter of his invention” (Crane, 2004, p. 122). Consequently, plots differ in structure according to which of their three causal ingredients is employed by the author as the synthesizing principle. There are, therefore, *plots of action*, where the synthesizing principle is a complete change in the situation of the protagonist, either gradual or sudden, determined and effected by character and thought; *plots of character*, where the principle is a complete process of change in the protagonist’s moral character, precipitated or molded by action and made manifest in action, as well as thought and feeling; *plots of thought*, where the principle is a complete process of change in the protagonist’s thought and feeling, conditioned and directed by character and action.

⁸ Cf. Schmid’s concept of the “abstract author”, which is “particularly useful in textual interpretation because it helps describe the layered process by which meaning is generated. [...] The presence of the abstract author in a model of communication highlights the fact that narrators, their texts, and the meanings expressed in them are all represented. These meanings take on their ultimate (in terms of the work) semantic intention only on the level of the abstract author, whose presence in the work, above the characters and the narrator and their associated levels of meaning, establishes a semantic level arching over the whole work: the authorial level.” (Schmid, 2010, p. 50)

Northrop Frey, in his famous *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) distinguishes four archetypal narratives (*mythoi* or generic plots): *comic*, *romantic*, *tragic*, and *ironic*. Such plots are broader than literary genres (or “pregeneric”), and come with certain readerly expectations as to their structure and mood, the typical characters involved, their values and aims, the ending, etc. More recently, Booker (2004) also argued for the existence of basic plots, situations, images, symbols, archetypal figures, and shaping forms, which recurred in man’s storytelling in every age and culture, taking various forms (folk tales, myths, legends, plays, novels, films, etc.). In his words, “all kinds of story, however profound or however trivial, ultimately spring from the same source, are shaped around the same basic patterns and are governed by the same hidden, universal rules” (Booker, 2004, p. 13). These basic plots, according to Booker, are seven: 1. *overcoming the monster* (a hero/heroine successfully confronts the threat posed by a monstrous figure of evil), 2. *rags to riches* (some initially humble hero/heroine raises up to a position of success and splendor, overcoming their disadvantages), 3. *the quest* (the hero/heroine goes on a long, difficult journey to satisfy an important goal or attain a “treasure”, real, metaphorical or spiritual), 4. *voyage and return* (the hero/heroine travels out of his/her familiar surroundings into another world, is transformed by this experience, and returns wiser and/or stronger), 5. *comedy* (the heroes are in a state of confusion, uncertainty and frustration, which gets worse but is finally resolved), 6. *tragedy* (some tragic event befalls on a proud, egocentric or over-ambitious hero/heroine), 7. *rebirth* (a young hero or heroine falls under the shadow of a dark power, they are imprisoned in a state of living death, but finally there comes a miraculous redemption).⁹

Abbott (2008, pp. 42-46) calls such timeless recurrent stories “masterplots” (eg. the Cinderella plot) and argues that they are connected with our deepest values, wishes and fears. Such plots can affect people's daily lives, more or less consciously (eg. choices in the face of moral dilemmas), and they serve as a cohesive link and influencing individual and collective identity (Abbott 2008, pp. 44-45). Masterplots are either linked to specific cultural traditions (e.g., European, American, Asian, etc.) or have a universal character (e.g., the plot of revenge, conquest, death and regeneration, etc.).

Another direction in the examination of plot is linked to feminist, queer, marxist, post-colonial, and critical race theory and criticism, affected also by insights offered by psychoanalytic and cognitive studies. In these contexts, plot construction is examined in terms of the representation of gender, racial and/or class power relations and roles, and of the ideological and value positions that plot projects or constructs, in a more or less overt attempt to influence readers’ attitudes towards the above issues (see, for instance, Davis, 1987; DuPlessis, 1985; Farwell, 1996; Gilbert & Gubar, 1979; Gregory, 2009; Hirsch, 1989; Jameson, 1981; Miller, 1980; Morgan, 2004; Nussbaum, 1995; Page, 2006; Showalter, 1978; Warhol & Lanser, 2015). Broad types of plots are thus identified, which are culturally defined,

⁹ As far as the structure of the plots is concerned, Booker identifies the Aristotelian three parts of Beginning (showing “a hero or heroine who is in some way undeveloped, frustrated or incomplete” and establishing a tension to be resolved), Middle (the hero or heroine falls under the shadow of an outside dark power or some inside dark qualities lying in them) and the Ending (the resolution, a kind of reversal or unknitting) (Booker, 2004, p. 218).

psychologically determined, and ideologically/ethically charged, such as the female/woman plot, euphoric vs dysphoric plots of female development, the mother/daughter plot, the marriage plot, the white plot, the queer plot, etc., which are connected to a process of subjective and collective identity formation through narrative. What is of particular interest in this vein of plot examination, is the ideological, ethical or value dilemmas faced by the characters, and how they handle them, characters' attitudes, thoughts and actions, the resolution of ideological conflicts, the unveiling, cloaking or naturalizing of social injustice, and, in general, the way human experience is arranged and interpreted through emplotment.¹⁰

Finally, there has been a wide interest in the study of plot in the light of generic theory and criticism: themes, situations, characters, functions, settings, conflicts and ways of resolving them, are conventionally linked to certain genres and sub-genres (eg. fantasy, adventure, romance, mystery, comedy, thriller, or "high" vs "popular" genre), and, in consequence, to readers' more or less conscious expectations about the nature and structure of the literary work and its plot (Eco, 1981; Fowler, 1982; Todorov, 1977, 1990). As Dixon & Bortolussi (2009, p. 569) note, "readers' knowledge of genre incorporates both the distinctive content specific to a given genre, as well as information concerning general features of narrative such as plot structure and reader response".

3. Plot as evolving structuration

Another branch of plot theory and criticism examines plot as narrative progression, as a dynamic sequencing, that is, of events and narrative elements, leading to a "textual movement", as felt in the process of reading. Plot, in this respect, emerges as a driving force that keeps the reader's interest undiminished: it creates expectations, suspense, surprise, twists, etc., arousing the reader's curiosity about impending events and sustaining it until the end of the reading. Moreover, the reader, in an attempt to comprehend the narrative, gradually and continuously (re)constructs the fictional world, seeks connections between the events of the story, tries to understand the motives of characters' actions, etc. In fact, it has been argued that the ability of readers (viewers or hearers) to comprehend a narrative is strongly correlated with their ability to perceive the *logical* and *causal* structuring of the story and to infer *intentionality* of characters (Graesser et al., 1994; Riedl & Young, 2010).¹¹ Plot and characters are, thus, not just strongly inter-connected, but, moreover, inseparable –examined separately only for methodological reasons.¹²

¹⁰ On the notion of emplotment and the "metamorphoses" of plot see Ricoeur (1985).

¹¹ For Kermode, plot structuration is essentially regulated by our need to find "consonance" between beginning, middle and end (in stories, as well as in our human lives – imposing some sort of structure on eternity). The "sense of an ending" is of pivotal importance for human existence. He discusses thus "fictions of the End" (such as Apocalypse), "about ways in which, under varying existential pressures, we have imagined the ends of the world. This, I take it, will provide clues to the ways in which fictions, whose ends are consonant with origins, and in concord, however unexpected, with their precedents, satisfy our needs" (Kermode, 2000, p. 5).

¹² Cf. the often quoted question posed by Henry James in his essay "The art of fiction", published in *Longman's Magazine* 4 (September 1884), and reprinted in *Partial Portraits* (1888): "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?".

Forster, in his aforementioned *Aspects of the Novel*, stressed the importance of the manipulation of time sequence and of causality, as far as the notion of plot is concerned, with the purpose of enhancing the necessary surprise and mystery. Barthes, in his seminal *Image-Music-Text* (1966), drawing on Propp, Bremond, Greimas, Tomashevsky, Todorov and others and emphasizing that meaning is not confined at the end) of the narrative but it runs across it, distinguishes between three interrelated levels of description in the narrative work: a) the level of *functions*, b) the level of *actions*, and c) the level of *narration* (Barthes, 2013, p. 88). Functions (segments of the work that have a functional nature) are distributional (correlated on the same level) or integrational (termed “indices”: their saturation requires a change of levels and constitute semantic units). The former’s ratification is syntagmatic, “further on”, comprising of “cardinal functions” (hinge-points of the narrative) and “catalysers” (filling in the narrative space separating the hinge functions). According to Barthes, the catalysers’ functionality is purely chronological, whereas the tie between two cardinal functions is both chronological and logical. “Catalysers are only consecutive units, cardinal functions are both consecutive and consequential. Everything suggests, indeed, that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes after being read in narratives as what is caused by; in which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* – a good motto for Destiny, of which narrative all things considered is no more than the ‘language’. It is the structural framework of cardinal functions which accomplishes the ‘telescoping’ of logic and temporality” (Barthes, 2013, p. 94).

Chatman (1978, p. 43) defines plot as a particular way of arranging the events in a story, or “story-as-discoursed”, having as its function “to emphasize or de-emphasize” certain story-events, to interpret some and to leave others to inference, to show or to tell, to comment or to remain silent, to focus on this or that aspect of an event or character”. Following Forster and Tomashevsky, Chatman also stresses the importance of *chrono-logical* (time and logic of time), as well as *causative* (either explicit or covert) relations between the events in narrative. As he stresses, even if the causal link between events is not explicit in narrative, the reader tends to supply it, inferring it “through ordinary presumptions about the world, including the purposive character of speech” (Chatman, 1978, p. 46).

Such an *impression* of causality, as assumed by the progression of narrative events, is usually considered, as presented above, one of the main elements of plot. Apart from causality, what have also been studied in relation to plot-as-progression are the different possible trajectories, virtual courses of events, or alternative forms of narrative progression, either actualized or not, lately in the framework of possible-worlds theory (Bremond, 1973, 1980; Doležel, 1998; Richardson, 2005). Ryan (1991), for instance, identifies two “motors” propelling the plot forward: accidental happenings and characters’ “wish worlds” (textual possible worlds), which, as long as they are not yet realized in the textual actual world, they motivate characters to act.

Narrative progression is considered by Phelan as one the key elements of narrative experience, the synthesis of both “the textual dynamics that govern the movement of narrative from beginning through

middle to end and the readerly dynamics [...] that both follow from and influence those textual dynamics” (Phelan, 2007, p. 3). Narrative progression, in this light, is viewed as a dynamic event, moving through time in both its telling and its reception. Moreover, authors generate, sustain, develop and resolve readers’ interests by introducing, complicating and resolving (or failing to resolve) certain instabilities of two kinds: a) instabilities occurring *on the level of the story* (between characters) and b) instabilities or “tensions” *on the level of the discourse* (between authors/narrators, on the one hand, and readers, on the other, as far as values, beliefs, opinions, expectations, etc. are concerned) (Phelan, 1989, p. 15).

Dannenberg (2008), on the other hand, stressing again the inextricable link between plot and character, identifies two main paths in the temporal and spatial trajectories of fictional worlds: a) the *convergent* and b) the *divergent*. Convergence plots are characterized by the intersection of the narrative paths of the characters, by their interconnection within a narrative world, “closing and unifying it as an artistic structure”. Conversely, divergence plots lead to the branching out of narrative paths, thus creating “an open pattern of diversification and multiplicity” (Dannenberg, 2008, p. 2). Typical examples of convergence plot are 19th century novels, in which there is a “closed” ending, with an obvious sense of unification and completion (e.g., marriage, recognition, reconnection, etc.). In the 20th century, on the other hand, there are many examples of open-ended narratives, in which the plots of the characters’ lives are not intertwined, but are allowed to disperse into an indefinite future, after the end of the narrative. According to Dannenberg, plot and plotting (as a mental operation), in general, can be defined as an attempt to understand and organize a broader, unorganized entity (“reality”, “the world”, “life” or parts thereof) by constructing *-cognitively, temporally and spatially-* a reductive and selective system. This wider entity is organized with causal connections (cause - effect), while it is structured, “mapped” and delimited at the level of space and time (it has a beginning and an end) (Dannenberg, 2008, p. 13). In this light, the reading of narrative is “fuelled by two different aspects of plot. First, there is the intranarrative configuration of events and characters, which is an ontologically unstable matrix of possibilities created by plot in its still unresolved aspect. This in turn fuels the reader’s cognitive desire to be in possession of the second aspect of plot –the final configuration achieved at narrative closure when (the reader hopes) a coherent and definitive constellation of events will have been achieved” (Dannenberg, 2008, p. 13).

As inferred by these two aspects of plot pinpointed by Dannenberg, conceptualizing plot as progression cannot be really detached from dealing with it as a fixed structure: plot is already there, to be discovered by the reader in the very act of reading the narrative to its end. In this sense, plot is *developing* and *already developed*.¹³ The reader partakes in a complicate process of being involved in the fictional

¹³ Chatman (1993, p. 20) had already argued that “the narrative use of plot is related to two old meanings of the word: ‘a measured parcel of ground,’ and ‘a secret plan or conspiracy’ (originally complot). Narrative plot shares both these senses. It is the ‘measured’ plan or pattern of a narrative; unlike a ‘plot of ground,’ however, it occurs in time, not in space. It also entails a certain ‘secret,’ namely, about what is going to happen next”.

events *as they “are happening”*, while being simultaneously aware that these events *have already happened*: they are already determined by the intentions of a (perceived or implied) author; they are part of an already complete sequence of events, which the reader re-enacts by reading. To put it simply, the reader, more or less consciously, perceives that the story he/she is reading is already told.

4. Plot as manipulation of desire and expectation

An important concept that is linked to plot is that of *desire*, especially as connected to *expectation*.¹⁴ Narrative desire was one of Brooks' key ideas in his classic *Reading for the plot* (1984). Having defined plot as “the syntax of a certain way of speaking our understanding of the world”, that is, “the organizing dynamic of a specific mode of human understanding” (Brooks, 1984, p. 7), he argues that plot is an activity elicited in the reader trying to comprehend the meanings that develop through textual and temporal succession. Consequently, according to Brooks, reading (for) the plot is “a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text. Narratives both tell of desire –typically present some story of desire- and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic or signification” (Brooks, 1984, p. 37).¹⁵ In fact, Brooks identifies three interrelated aspects of desire: desire as *narrative thematic*, desire as *narrative motor* (a self-contained motor that propels the plot), and desire as *the intention of narrative language and the act of telling* (Brooks, 1984, p. 54). Moreover, the author and reader share the same desire to make sense of experience, a desire that is met by employment as imposition of some kind of order and structure on it. In the same line, Gauthier (2013, p. 4-6), who examines modern novelists with a concern with history and the past, argues that although contemporary writers exhibit a simultaneous desire for, and suspicion of, employment, in the form of a unified and totalizing narrative, yet the upsurge of an new “historical fiction” reflects the anxieties we experience in our relationship with the past and a desire to construct plot patterns of understanding and (re)ordering the chaos of history; a desire, that is, for stability in an unstable age.

Phelan (2007), on his part, stresses that narrative progression is intertwined with the dynamic progression of the readers' intellectual, emotional, moral and aesthetic responses to it. Response to the *mimetic* component of narrative includes the readers' judgments and emotions, desires, hopes, expectations, satisfactions, and disappointments; response to its *thematic* component relate to the cultural, ideological, philosophical, or ethical issues addressed in the narrative; response to its *synthetic* component involve the readers' interest in the narrative as artificial construct (Phelan, 2007, p. 6). Responses to the narrative rely largely on the process of *immersion*: the readers' engagement in the story world and the pleasure they take in their emotional involvement (*empathy*) with the actions and

¹⁴ On narrative and basic theories of desire see Clayton (1989).

¹⁵ As Crane (2004, p. 122) put it, “We are bound, as we read or listen, to form expectations about what is coming and to feel more or less determinate desires relatively to our expectations. At the very least, if we are interested at all, we desire to know what is going to happen or how the problems faced by the characters are going to be solved.” Readers take pleasure, that is, in inferring from ambiguous signs the “true state of affairs”. Chambers (1984, p. 11) considers it as a relatively modern phenomenon that narrative (as communicational act) lay claim to “seduction” as its own *modus operandi*, and not just as a novelistic subject.

thoughts of the characters and the situations they are engaged in. As Crane puts it, (2004, p. 123): “for some of the characters we wish good, for others ill, and, depending on our inferences as to the events, we feel hope or fear, pity or satisfaction, or some modification of these or similar emotions. The peculiar power of any plot of this kind, as it unfolds, is a result of our state of knowledge at any point in complex interaction with our desires for the characters as morally differentiated beings; and we may be said to have grasped the plot in the full artistic sense only when we have analyzed this interplay of desires and expectations sequentially in relation to the incidents by which it is produced”.¹⁶

Toolan (2010), from a corpus stylistic and literary linguistics standpoint, provides useful insight into how a narrative text’s wording guides readers’ expectations and responses to it, eliciting judgments or reactions, such as suspense, surprise, gaps, mystery, tension, etc. It is exactly this “guidance” of readers’ expectations, combined with the manipulation of their desire, that lies, to our mind, at the heart of plot structuring. In specific, the author relies on readers’ background knowledge, which leads to expectations, on various levels:

a) *generic and literary knowledge*: the reader, drawing on prior reading experience (cf. intertextuality), has already formed expectations, on the basis of which he/she comprehends and makes inferences as to the structure and content of the plot (e.g., how the plot usually develops in a love or detective novel, in a specific era, or in novels by a specific author, etc.), the responses usually elicited, etc. Thus, the specific narrative one reads is continuously compared to an idea of a “typical” or “conventional” plot, in a particular the textual genre, literary current, author’s production, etc.

b) *world and cultural knowledge* (publicly shared): the reader possesses a knowledge of “how the world works” (knowledge of human anatomy, psychology, sociocultural conventions, history, law, etc.)

c) *personal “knowledge”*: the personal ideology, beliefs, stances, values, convictions, attitudes etc., formed both by one’s gender, social class, education, professional status, race, ethnicity, culture, etc., and subjective experience. Such personal knowledge, attitudes or *ethics* is connected to one’s desire, as reflected in the reading experience of narratives: desire affects what the reader wishes to happen to characters and how their fictional fate should be “righteously” decided.

¹⁶ This is perhaps why Fludernik (2009) stresses in her definition of narrative the necessity of human or human-like qualities for the fictional characters. Not only can readers understand, in this way, the characters’ actions, feelings, choices, etc., but most importantly they can become emotionally and morally involved in the fictional world and, consequently, form desires as to the actions and fate of that possible worlds’ inhabitants. Cf. Fludernik (2009, p. 6): “A narrative (Fr. *récit*; Ger. *Erzählung*) is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (action and plot structure). It is the experience of these protagonists that narratives focus on, allowing readers to immerse themselves in a different world and in the life of the protagonists”.

Such pre-determined and extra-textual knowledge, on the one hand, leads to “visualizations” (the construction of mental images or concepts) and to “filling in” of gaps in the narrative, and, on the other, to form expectations plotwise. Moreover, specific textual features guide such expectations, from the very selection of the genre, to particular aspects of the narrative, such as time, place, setting, story opening, characterization, characters’ names, theme, themes, style, vocabulary, intertextual references and allusions, repetitions, patterns, etc. (*expectation-generating narrativity*, Toolan, 2010, p. 12). Such guided expectations are satisfied or not, according to the authorial intention; sometimes their satisfaction is postponed, slowing down action and increasing suspense; sometimes they are overturned, as the narrative introduces the unexpected and the unpredictable, leading to the readers’ surprise and the feelings aroused by it (Toolan, 2010, pp. 8-9). The plot, thus, emerges as a driving force that keeps the readers’ interest undiminished, enhancing their pleasure in reading.

4. Conclusion

Plot, as succinctly presented above, is a dynamic creative and cognitive process that defines narrative composition and reception. It entails the artistic structuring of the narrative text in a complete aesthetic unity of beginning, middle and end, the selection, (re)ordering, causal linking, and patterning of story events, the logical possibilities of narrative sequences, the arousal of readers’ interest in the story’s development and their emotional responses (suspense, tension, anxiety, frustration, satisfaction), the progression towards a definitive and satisfying closure (a kind of Aristotelian *telos*), or the rejection of it, as well as the connection with broader ideological and ethical issues. The reader (at least a competent/proficient one), at any point in the plot’s evolution (the text’s “present”), constantly constructs, interprets and re-evaluates it, conceptually moving in multiple directions at the same time: *retro-spectively*, in the text’s “past” (as to the linear course of the narrative progression), having in mind what he/she knows so far about the story and the characters, making correlations between events, identifying/infering causal connections, etc.; *pro-spectively*, in the text’s “future”, making conjectures about the development of the plot, making predictions about characters’ actions, feeling anxious about the fate of the characters, desiring specific courses of development and closure, etc.; at the same time, he/she moves on a higher level of plot supervision (*super-spectively*), interpreting it in relation to the whole narrative, but also comparing it with his/her previous knowledge about typical plots in this genre (Fig. 1).

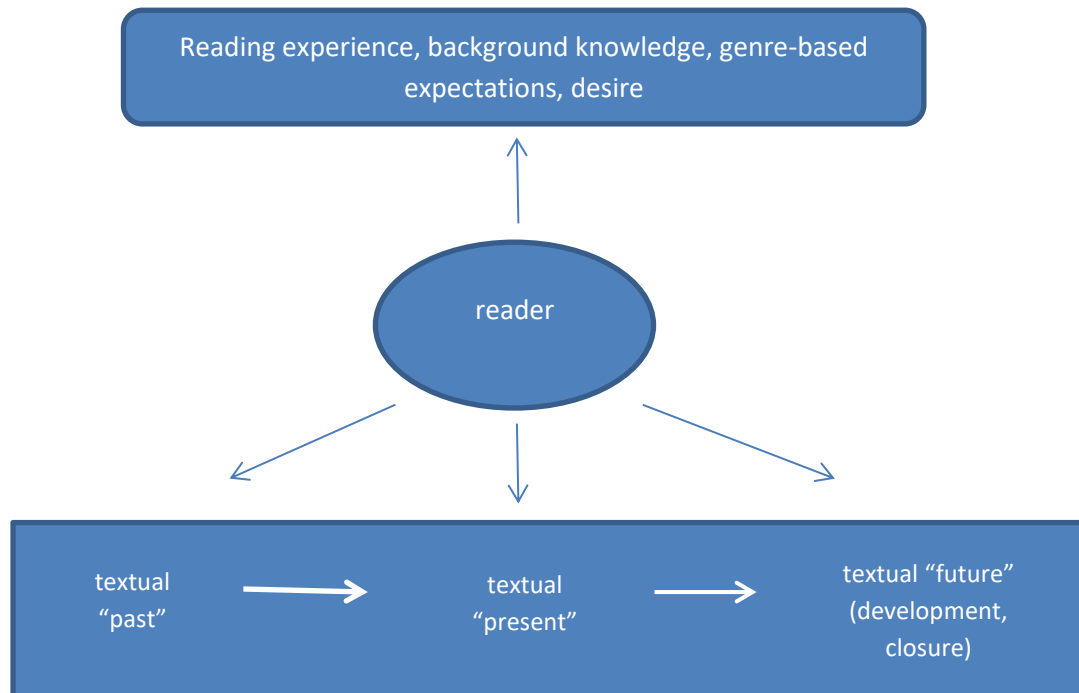


Figure 1. Narrative plot

In other words, at any point of the narrative progression, the plot is dynamically comprehended and interpreted, in relation to what preceded, what will (probably) happen and what (usually) happens in similar narratives –all against the background of what actually happens as reading advances and the story unfolds.

In this light, plot may be comprehended as in a constant state of flux between the existent/the already written (what one has read so far in the narrative and also what one knows usually happens in similar plots, or in the “world”, in general) and the non-existent, the yet-to-be-written (what one expects that will happen next, and, moreover, desires to happen). Of course, desire and expectation may be either complementary or contradictory to each other. In any case, however, they both determine narrative construction and reading pleasure. As a consequence, teaching students ways and techniques of narratively depicting desire and, most importantly, manipulating readers’ desires and expectations, as realized in the work of crafted authors, and providing them with writing opportunities to exercise such a skill, seems of uttermost importance in creative writing workshops.

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