

# Contents

List of Figures	x
Preface	xi
Introduction	1
<b>Part 1: Theorizing Time and Space in Narrative Fiction</b>	
1. Cognitive Plotting	
<i>Crossing Narrative Boundaries and Connecting Worlds</i>	19
2. Ontological Plotting	
<i>Narrative as a Multiplicity of Temporal Dimensions</i>	45
3. Spatial Plotting	
<i>Paths, Links, and Portals</i>	65
<b>Part 2: Theorizing Coincidence and Counterfactuality</b>	
4. The Coincidence Plot	89
5. Counterfactuals and Other Alternate Narrative Worlds	109
<b>Part 3: Coincidence and Counterfactuality in the History of Narrative Fiction</b>	
6. The Metamorphoses of the Coincidence Plot	141
7. The Narrative Evolution of Counterfactuals	181
Conclusion	225
Source Acknowledgments	233
Notes	235
Glossary of Key Terms	249
Works Cited	255
Index	283

# Figures

1. A Traditional Model of Narrative Communication	22
2. The Reading Experience as Immersive Journey	24
3. The Essential Structure of the Coincidental Encounter within the Traditional Coincidence Plot	68
4. Actual and Counterfactual Paths of Time in <i>Austen's Mansfield Park</i>	69
5. Multiple Actual Worlds and the Transworld Journey of the Protagonist in De Camp's "The Wheels of If"	70
6. Coincidental Relationships and Double Identity in Austen's <i>Persuasion</i>	97

## Introduction

And as for coincidences in books—there’s something cheap and sentimental about the device . . . the sudden but convenient Dickensian benefactors; the neat shipwreck on a foreign shore which reunites siblings and lovers. . . . I’d ban coincidences, if I were a dictator of fiction.

When the writer provides two different endings to his novel (why two? why not a hundred?), does the reader seriously imagine . . . that the work is reflecting life’s variable outcomes? . . . The novel with two endings doesn’t reproduce . . . reality; it merely takes us down two diverging paths.

Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984, 67, 89)

### Convergent and Divergent Plots and Character Trajectories

Geoffrey Braithwaite, the self-opinionated narrator of *Flaubert’s Parrot*, clearly has a serious problem appreciating plot in narrative fiction. Braithwaite’s metanarrative comments are nevertheless notable because they refer to examples of the two major plot patterns investigated in this study. Contrary, however, to Braithwaite’s opinion, these two plots are not the vagaries of particular genres or periods but phenomena that can be traced in a variety of forms through the developmental history of narrative fiction. They constitute key examples of how narrative fiction plots character trajectories across the space and time of fictional worlds and endows them with the cognitive and emotional power that makes them compelling narratives. Indeed, these plots are so widespread that studying their historical development provides us with a map of the evolution of the modern novel.

As many studies have shown (e.g., Harvey 1965; Phelan 1989; Forster 1990), plot and character are inextricably intertwined. The plots of coincidence and counterfactuality are configurations of characters’ life journeys across narrative worlds. The major form of the coincidence plot narrates the initially divergent but ultimately convergent paths of individual family members and culminates in recognition and reunion. All key forms of the counterfactual involve the remapping of the life trajectories of characters to create altered outcomes and often dramatically transformed life stories. It is this central character focus that gives both these plots their narrative or, rather, human interest and accounts for their perennial success in works of fiction. The present study proposes a new cognitive,

reader-oriented theoretical model in order to analyze the sources of their narrative power and their historical evolution as key plots in narrative fiction.

Formulated as spatial metaphors, the plots of coincidence and counterfactuality can be mapped as the opposing patterns created when vectors in time and space move together or move apart, tracing pathways that either converge or diverge. Convergence involves the intersection of narrative paths and the interconnection of characters within the narrative world, closing and unifying it as an artistic structure. Divergence, conversely, concerns the bifurcation or branching of narrative paths and thereby creates an open pattern of diversification and multiplicity. Convergence is a form of narrative unification most typically represented by the type of closed ending that provides a clear “sense of an ending” (Kermode 1967)—a form that was most prevalent in pre-twentieth-century fiction (Korte 1985a) and was typically constituted in the nineteenth century by the frequent use of marriage in closure (Reed 1975, 120–25). Coincidence in narrative fiction is a plot pattern with fundamentally convergent tendencies because it creates relationships that interlink characters across the space and time of the narrative world. Divergence, in the general form of the open ending (i.e., where the characters’ life plots are not knotted together but left to fan out into an unwritten future), has been seen as a particular phenomenon of the twentieth century (Korte 1985a), a period in which women authors write “beyond the ending” (DuPlessis 1985) of the euphorically convergent tying of the marriage knot. It has also been claimed that only with the watershed of modernism did plot lose its linearity (Hughes and Lund 1991). However, as this study shows, plot divergence—in the form of counterfactuals and other forms of alternate-world construction—is not a specifically twentieth-century phenomenon at all but can be traced from much earlier beginnings.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the history of narrative fiction traced in this study shows how key texts are the product of a dialectic between convergent and divergent tendencies. George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987) are notable works of fiction because, seen in the light of the development of coincidence and counterfactuality, they represent the intersection of conflicting plot conventions and cultural pressures.

The traditional and most powerful form of the coincidence plot has existed since at least the Oedipus story. It achieves its power through its central component of kinship reunion. The most crucial component of the coincidence plot in its complex form of representation is a cognitive one and concerns *recognition*—what Aristotle called *anagnorisis* (*Poetics* 52a30–52b6, 1996, 18–19). It is in the management and presentation of recognition—above all in terms of suspense management, the representation of character consciousness, and the spatial depiction of the recognition scene—that the narrative power of the

coincidence plot can be measured. The other key feature of the coincidence plot that lends itself to extensive analysis is the narrative explanation of the coincidence of characters' paths in the narrative world: what system of justification, if any, does a novel's discourse provide for implausibilities of plot?

The timing of the recognition scene is crucial in determining whether coincidence is part of a negative or a positive plot. The type of relationship between the coinciding characters and the timing of recognition, that is, whether it is instantaneous or deferred, can make the difference between euphoric and tragic versions. Delayed recognition between close relatives can result in unintentional incest or lead to other serious misunderstandings and family tragedies. Variants of this essentially Oedipal form produce a catalog of family disasters and near misses from Sir Philip Sidney's *Old Arcadia* (ca. 1580) to Paul Auster's *Moon Palace* (1989). Family reunion can, however, involve a euphoric element, and this form was milked in particular by Victorian novelists; by contrast, modernism's antipathy to previous literary conventions is reflected in its avoidance of coincidence involving kinship. The euphoric family reunion plot was then reinstated, both realistically and parodistically, in postmodernist fiction. Indeed, postmodernism's postrealist attitude to plot meant that narrative no longer had any compunctions about the improbabilities of temporal and spatial manipulation involved in the coincidence plot, leading to a widespread resurgence of the coincidence plot.

While the traditional coincidence plot has survived right down to the contemporary novel, new forms have also emerged. In the modernist period a different type of coincidence emerges that is based not on the literal kinship of blood links or on the connections of friendship between characters but on a connecting principle of *analogous relationships*. Subsequently, in the postmodernist genre of historiographic metafiction, networks of analogical coincidences are used to link multiple temporal levels.

The modern novel, therefore, continually reveals new and interesting (and indeed for this reason "novel") configurations of the coincidence plot right up to the present. However, the fact that the coincidence plot occurs in texts designated both as "romances" and as "novels" undermines the claims of genre theorists who have polarized the novel and the romance (Reeve 1930; Watt 1987; Congreve 1991, 474). In fact, far from being the novel's generic other, elements from the romance have frequently been re-infused with the novel and thus have regenerated novelistic realism to produce new forms.

Counterfactual thought experiments about what might have been constitute a key form of human consciousness (Roese and Olson 1995c). Speculations by characters in novels about how their life might have developed differently

## 4 INTRODUCTION

therefore constitute a highly realistic technique of character depiction that simulates human cognitive activity. While the rhetorical use of counterfactuals is already evident in a Renaissance romance like Sidney's *Old Arcadia*, it is in the subsequently developing genre of the fictional autobiography that counterfactual life plots become a key feature. In Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), for example, Moll speculates in two counterfactual sketches of her first liaison about what would have happened if she had not sacrificed her "virtue" to her first lover: "Had I acted as became me, and resisted as virtue and honour required, this gentleman had either desisted his attacks, finding no room to expect the accomplishment of his design, or had made fair and honourable proposals of marriage" (Defoe 1978, 48).

While the eighteenth century is the spawning ground of such autobiographical thought experiments in narrative fiction, the nineteenth century is the site of a more widespread proliferation of alternate worlds. The novels of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, for example, all contain counterfactual plots of biographical development. These alternate plots can be seen as attempts to break out of both the intertextual and cultural pressure of the convergent marriage plot and other unrealistically euphoric forms of closure. While they do not actually write "beyond the ending" in the manner of twentieth-century women novelists (DuPlessis 1985), these authors certainly write "around" the ending by embedding alternate versions in the novel's discourse. Moreover, the fact that Austen, Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy also use forms of the coincidence plot reveals an underlying tension between the literary pressure of romance-oriented convergence and a countermovement toward plot divergence in this phase of the novel's development. Counterfactuals in nineteenth-century narrative fiction thus also highlight another aspect of the ongoing historical tension between realism and romance.

The key role of the nineteenth century as the site of the emergence of advanced forms of counterfactuality is also confirmed by the beginnings of the genre of alternate history in this period. In the twentieth century a plethora of different fictional systems of multiple alternate worlds subsequently emerge. In science fiction meddling time travelers become capable of creating different or multiple versions of history with differing ontological hierarchies. Notably, transworld journeys between factual and counterfactual worlds, as in L. Sprague de Camp's "The Wheels of If" (1940), create a story with multiple versions of the same character. Later in the twentieth century, as the work of Brian McHale (1987, 1992) has extensively shown, the multiple-world tendency grows apace in postmodernist fiction. Experimental postmodernist narrative creates multiple story versions, as in the double ending of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Historiographic metafiction blends alternate history with postmodernism and

combines biographical and historical counterfactuals. In this genre, history is no longer under threat of attack by time-traveling saboteurs, as in science fiction, but its overall status and claim to be authoritative fact are under question.

The historical ubiquity of plots of coincidence and counterfactuality therefore provides extensive material for the study of the technical development of the novel over the centuries. An analysis of the development of these plots reveals what distinguishes earlier forms of narrative fiction from their more recent progeny by identifying new techniques and strategies that evolved in the representation of coincidence and counterfactuality. Among other things, these strategies concern the processes by which coincidence is domesticated and subsumed into the ostensibly “possible” worlds of the novel as opposed to the more fabulous and distant worlds of the romance. By investigating the history of coincidence and counterfactuality in narrative fiction, we can therefore observe in detail the evolution in the modern novel of the narrative techniques that create a state of immersion in the reader. As Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) suggests in her comprehensive study of immersion and interactivity across literature and media, “immersion” is a more useful concept than “realism” to describe the narrative phenomena that accompanied the rise of the modern novel.

Immersion is also linked to another key concept in narrative theory—that of *narrativity* used in the sense of a qualitative aspect of narrative. This involves identifying the kind of narratives that Gerald Prince refers to as those that are “more narrative than others, [and] as it were . . . ‘tell a better story’” (1982, 141). (This comparative and qualitative sense of narrativity has also been designated as *tellability* by William Labov [1972] and Ryan [1991], but the latter term is not as satisfactory for application to novelistic discourse because of its primary contextualization in Labov’s study of oral narrative.) The plots of coincidence and counterfactuality are excellent narrative phenomena with which to perform a transhistorical study of how the novel develops qualitative narrativity. Thus, this study shows how the coincidence plot of romance develops greater narrativity when it is transformed by more sophisticated forms of suspense and character-cognitive depiction in the narrative discourse of the modern novel. It also shows how counterfactuals develop increasing narrativity in the evolution of the novel when authors, from Defoe in the eighteenth century to Philip K. Dick in the twentieth century, tap into and explore the human psyche’s fascination with events that might have been.

The ultimate aim of this study is therefore a historically wide-ranging but closely targeted investigation of two major but hitherto uncharted plot patterns. The primary step in the achievement of this goal is the formulation of a new model for the analysis of the narrative plotting of time and space. This model, which is presented in the first three chapters of this study, is mainly illustrated

with material from the plots of coincidence and counterfactuality. However, its major parameters—the key cognitive operations that plots stimulate, the ontological structuring of narrative time, and the cognitive simulation of the bodily experience of space—are applicable to the study of time and space in narrative fiction as a whole. This model does not aim to reduce the concept of “plot” to a synchronic typology but to register diachronic variation and to highlight patterns of diversity and development in narrative fiction. This sensitivity to diversity is produced by a cross-fertilization of narrative theory with cognitive and psychological research.

Now that section 1 has introduced the major textual phenomena to be examined, section 2 of this introduction will briefly chart the major areas of previous research that flow into this study. Section 3 then outlines the study’s own theoretical contribution and structure.

### A Brief History of Approaches to Plot and Related Theories

“Narrativity” also has a different, more normative, and less qualitative sense when it is used to refer to the intrinsic properties of all narratives as opposed to other forms of discourse. Prince (1999, 44) usefully distinguishes this generic sense of narrativity as “narrativeness.” As part of the ongoing quest to capture the elusive spirit of narrativity, twentieth-century criticism has provided a plethora of plot definitions.<sup>2</sup> Despite its apparent simplicity of reference, *plot* is one of the most elusive termini in narrative theory. The repeated attempts to redefine the parameters of the term are symptomatic of the extreme complexity of the temporal dimension of narrative and indicate that “plot” itself is too complex to be satisfactorily enclosed (or “plotted”) by one definition. The history of plot theory has been documented by a number of critical surveys, each of which—like the summary below—undertakes its own individual journey across an extensive and varied theoretical terrain.<sup>3</sup>

### *Narrative, Plot, and Story: A Glimpse into the Terminological Thicket*

If many theories of plot have one thing in common, it is that they see plot as something more complex than story, which is a simpler and more consensually constant term referring to the basic chronology of events out of which something more complex, plot, is constructed.<sup>4</sup> The constructedness of plot in comparison to story is already evident in the fact that, while one can speak of “telling a story,” one cannot in the same way talk of “telling a plot,” because the plot *is* the telling. Theories of plot can thus be compared with each other in terms of how far and in what way they see plot as being different from story.<sup>5</sup> In classical literary theory, Aristotle’s concept of *mythos* formulates plot as the conversion of the bare bones of story into a tightly structured aesthetic unit with a beginning, a

middle, and an end. In early-twentieth-century criticism, E. M. Forster (1990, 87) saw plot as consisting in the creation (and also the suspenseful suppression) of causal connections between the individual events that constitute the chronology of the story. Contemporaneous to Forster, the Russian formalists Boris Tomashevsky (1965, 66–67) and Viktor Shklovsky (1990, 170) focused on the plot's (*sjuzhet*'s) rearrangement of the linear chronology of story (*fabula*) and the resulting subversion of the causal-linear structures of the story. Other models did not focus on plot's transmutation of story but sought to uncover the grammar, or *langue*, of plot by uncovering recurrent patterns in the stories of a larger corpus of narratives (see Dundes 1964; Greimas 1966; Propp 1968; Bremond 1970; Fügler 1972; Prince 1973; Todorov 1977). A different form of the story-condensification method was practiced by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 206–31) in his reconfiguration of the Oedipus myth in terms of binary oppositions. Notably, Claude Bremond (1980) addressed plot from a different perspective, seeing it as including virtual events that may be desired or strived for by characters but that never actually occur in the narrative world.

Other studies produced a variety of generically oriented plot models based on both story and more complex understandings of "plot." The American New Critic R. S. Crane (1952, 620) distinguished between different types of subject matter, which he named plots of action, character, and thought. Northrop Frye (1971) identified four "generic plots" in his "theory of myths": comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony/satire (see also Scholes and Kellogg 1966, 207–39). Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981, 84–258) concept of the *chronotope* proposed a combined analysis of the parameters of time, space, and perspective in particular epochs to define generic categories such as "adventure time" and "biographical time." Distinctions in the plot formulae of high and popular genres of narrative were focused on by Tzvetan Todorov (1977) and Umberto Eco (1981).

Ruth E. Page observes that "no single plot typology has yet been able to account for" the complexities of "gender . . . across and within cultures" (2006, 52); this indicates the necessity of a flexible approach in feminist narrative theory. Such flexibility can take the form, as in Page's study, of "synthesising aspects of analysis derived from different paradigms" (2006, 52) in order, for example, to analyze the representation of real-world female characters in contemporary media narratives (2006, 116–43). A productive flexibility can also be derived from a focused but diachronic approach to narrative. Thus, the feminist analysis of narrative has isolated different plot types arising out of the stereotypical allocation and limitation of roles due to a protagonist's gender. Nancy K. Miller (1980) distinguishes between euphoric and dysphoric plots of female development. Rachel Blau DuPlessis (1985) differentiates between the female protagonist as "hero," in which she is an independent agent in her own "quest

plot,” and as “heroine,” in which she is constrained within a love plot; Andrea Gutenberg (2000) undertakes a comprehensive survey of female plots charting variations of the romance, quest, and family plot (see also Russ 1973; Abel 1983; Miller 1985; Hirsch 1989); Lois E. Bueler (2001) investigates the development of the *tested woman plot*, a deeply patriarchal plot pattern, across several genres and periods of literary history. While the present study does not have an exclusively feminist agenda, its diachronic focus pinpoints key developments in the representation of female characters within love plots, showing how the plots of coincidence and counterfactuality reflect and respond to key changes in the cultural and social position of women.

The story-discourse distinction (itself based on the Russian formalists’ *fabula/sjuzhet* model) has also been a key field for the formulation of plot theory. Seymour Chatman’s definition of “plot” as “story-as-discoursed” (1978, 43) represents one solution: here “plot” becomes a fundamental bridge concept between the abstract level of story and its textual realization. By contrast, Meir Sternberg (1978, 13) differentiates between the four terms *story*, *fabula*, *sjuzhet*, and *plot*; in marginalizing the latter as being “dispensable” in contrast to the other three terms, he firmly privileges *sjuzhet* over *plot*. Gérard Genette’s (1980) influential theory of order (itself greatly indebted to Lämmert [1991] and widely adopted by other narrative theorists), explores forms of anachrony—a discourse’s deviation from story order through movements into the past (analepsis) and the future (prolepsis) of the story. Building on a distinction made by Günther Müller (1968), Genette distinguishes between the time of “narrative and story” (1980, 94); this concept—now more commonly formulated as discourse time versus story time—foregrounds the fundamental ontological divide between the time elapsing in the fictional world (and “experienced” by characters) and time elapsing for the reader as she reads the text.<sup>6</sup> This ontological divide, however, as chapter 1 of this study shows, is completely suppressed by narrative strategies that draw the reader into the text, creating a state of immersion.

In the new intellectual climate of poststructuralist reorientation, many of the existing models were subjected to critique and revision, and this indicated the ultimate inadequacy of the story-discourse distinction to comprehend the complexities of narrative temporality (see, e.g., Herman 2002, 214–20; Richardson 2002a). These criticisms reflected the feeling that plot, and indeed the spirit of narrativity, had managed to evade the systematic net that structuralism had set up.<sup>7</sup> Peter Brooks (1992) and Paul Ricoeur (1984, 1985, 1988) are both critical of structuralist models for their static naming of parts and “their failure to engage the movement and dynamic of narrative” (Brooks 1992, 20): “The plot is a movement. . . . [T]o know all the roles—*is not yet to know any plot whatsoever*” (Ricoeur 1985, 43). Ricoeur himself distinguishes the sense-making activity brought to

plots by using the related term *emplotment* to distinguish “the dynamic character of the configurating operation” (1984, 65).<sup>8</sup> For Brooks “plot” is not localizable as a single definition but can be comprehended in terms of “narrative desire” or “textual erotics” so that “the reading of plot [is] a form of desire that carries us forward, onward, through the text” (1992, 37).<sup>9</sup>

### *Extending the Narrative Dimensions of Plot*

In *The Sense of an Ending* Frank Kermode underlines the importance of a narrative’s creation of subterfuge regarding the final outcome of events: “The story that proceeded very simply to its obviously predestined end would be nearer myth than novel or drama. . . . [T]he interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route” (1967, 18). Hayden White approaches the question of plot and closure from a different avenue—the analysis of historiography:

Common opinion has it that the plot of a narrative imposes a meaning on the events that comprise its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events *all along*. . . . Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see “the end” in every beginning? (1980, 19, 23)

White’s comments highlight how closure imposes one meaning and significance on a series of events by crystallizing it into a rigid structure. Conversely, White implies, if we perceive narrative from the preclosure position, it constitutes something much more ontologically open and pluralistic, as yet devoid of a final organizing pattern. White therefore understands “plot” as the final postclosure state of a narrative in which teleological patterns have been imposed on a sequence of events.

By contrast, other theoreticians—from Bremond’s (1980) conception of plot as a “network of possibilities,” through Brooks’s (1992) idea of “narrative desire” and James Phelan’s (1989) concept of “narrative progression,” to Ryan’s (1991) “principle of diversification”—have defined “plot” as an ontologically or interpretatively unstable dimension that exists *before* the narrative text comes to an end. While it is important to distinguish between them, it is not necessary to choose between these two conceptions of plot; they can be seen as two key aspects that create the narrative dynamics of plot. Phelan’s concept of narrative progression is founded particularly on this dual aspect: narratives are “developing wholes” (1989, 15) moving toward closure. Studying a narrative’s progression involves investigating “how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers’ interests in narrative” (Phelan 1989, 15) and how a narrative’s design, particularly

its ending, is determined by its beginning and middle. The role of causality in the dynamics of plot has also received more substantial attention in recent key works by Brian Richardson (1997) and Emma Kafalenos (2006).

The study of the ontological dynamics of narrative has also been stimulated by the application of possible-worlds theory to the study of narrative fiction. A philosophical concept adopted by various disciplines (Allén 1989), possible-worlds theory's basic premise is that any world (the real world or, equally, a fictional one) can best be understood not as a single world but by applying the thesis that "the world we are part of is but one of a plurality of worlds" (Lewis 1986, vii). Dependent on the given perspective, different worlds can form the perspectival center of a system of multiple worlds in a flexible, recenterable conceptual system (Ryan 1995b) in which each world is actual from the perspective of an inhabitant of that world (Lewis 1979, 184). The work of Lubomír Doležel (1976a, 1976b, 1988, 1998) has been central to the literary application of possible-worlds theory, while the work of Thomas G. Pavel (1985) and Ryan (1991) has represented the most imaginative applications to drama and narrative fiction, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Ryan (1991) sees plot in narrative as an interaction of virtual and actual worlds: the "private" worlds of characters constituted by their wishes, knowledge, intentions, and obligations can deviate from or conflict with the "reality" of the actual world of the text, thereby generating conflict and tellability—the stuff of interesting narrative. Ryan's (2001) study *Narrative as Virtual Reality* extended the concept of virtuality in connection with that of immersion and interactive electronic texts. David Lewis (1973, 1986) and Nicholas Rescher (1975) established important premises within possible-worlds philosophy for the study of counterfactuals and transworld identity that have been taken up in the study of literature by Uri Margolin (1996) and represent key points of departure for the ontological consideration of plot and character in the present study.

The overall tendency toward the diachronic application of narrative theory (see, e.g., Fludernik 1996a, 2003) has also been reflected in the studies of plot that undertake a combined focus on the *formal-developmental* and *cultural* dynamics of specific plot patterns across an extensive historical period.<sup>11</sup> As Bueler observes: "Watching a single plot move between genres is a superb way to study generic forces at work. Linked to the story of genre is the history of cultural attitudes and changes" (2001, vii). Bueler's rigorous definition of the narrative coordinates of the tested woman plot enables her to chart this literary embodiment of patriarchal culture across the centuries. Similarly, Gutenberg's (2000) harnessing of possible-worlds theory and feminist concepts allows her to pinpoint key developmental patterns in the female plots of romance, quest, and the family from the eighteenth to the twentieth century.