

Suspense in the English Novel from Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad

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Abstract: Because of critical neglect, there is no established terminology to describe techniques of suspense. Borrowing from Aristotle, Koestler, and others, a new body of concepts is suggested and a number of different types of suspense are identified. Most importantly, a distinction of tense is established, between types of suspense which relate to the narrative past, present, and future.

The classical world's intuition of a connection between mental uncertainty and the physical state of hanging has conditioned Western man's notion of narrative suspense until a comparatively recent date. Eighteenth-century theories of the sublime helped to create an understanding that suspense was not necessarily painful.

Through an analysis of novels by Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dickens, Hardy, and Conrad, an attempt is made to identify and evaluate the most common suspense strategies in the period's popular genres, notably the Austenian romance, mystery, and tragedy.

The Austenian romance is compared to the detective story in that narrative presentation is determined by the need to control the reader's expectations, and to achieve an ending which is both satisfactory and surprising. The latter requirement may have contributed to the gradual disappearance of the authorial "voice" in the course of the nineteenth century, and a consequent reduction in the pleasures of irony and comedy.

During the Victorian period, many genres are combined in the long novel, but mystery gradually advances in popularity and sophistication, to the point where narrative events are often inappropriately exploited as secrets.

Tragedy involves a creative conflict between the reader's hopes and expectations, so he is permitted to glimpse the overall tragic process, and suspense is generated on the levels of theme and causality. The problems incurred by an inability or unwillingness to conclude structures of theme suspense are considered finally.

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Nicholas Smith University College, Oxford

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For Sarah

‘What do you like doing best in the world, Pooh?’ ‘Well,’ said Pooh, ‘what I like best—’ and then he had to stop and think. Because although eating Honey was a very good thing to do, there was a moment just before you began to eat it which was better than when you were, but he didn’t know what it was called.

A.A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner*

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Introduction

(i) Readers and *Readers*

The student of suspense is faced initially with an extraordinary paradox. It would be difficult to find a narrative of any time or place which has not aroused, or attempted to arouse, some kind of suspense in the minds of an audience, reading or hearing it for the first time.

Suspense is reckoned to be the most basic of all responses to narrative literature, as E.M. Forster suggests in *Aspects of the Novel*:¹

Neanderthal man listened to stories, if one may judge by the shape of his skull. The primitive audience was an audience of shock-heads, gaping round the camp-fire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense (p. 18).

Yet the phenomenon of suspense has created no more than a flicker of interest among critics and scholars of literature in general and narrative in particular. While conferences have met to discuss such concepts as tragedy, irony, and metaphor, the power which may be supposed to have kept Neanderthal man awake has been substantially forgotten.² Forster himself mentions it only in order to be able to dismiss it as being beneath his contempt. He projects a historical picture of the gradual sophistication of narrative as it evolved away from its limited anti-hypnotic role and became competent to create a wide variety of more subtle thoughts and feelings. Forster suggests that Scheherazade 'knew how to wield the weapon of suspense - the only literature tool that had any effect upon tyrants and savages' (p.18). Suspense is, for Forster, a great, blunt cudgel which can be used with bludgeoning effect, and should be wielded nowadays only by those who do not know how to produce finer effects.

Suspense is beneath contempt because it is a 'cheap' means of retaining the attention of the ordinary reader, of persuading him to read through to the last page, through his simple need to know 'what happens next'. Suspense is often linked with sensationalism, and the gratuitous provision of representations of sex and violence, as an

1 E M Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974; 1st pub. 1927).

2 Such conferences include the symposium, "Metaphor: the Conceptual Leap", sponsored by the Univ. of Chicago Extension in Feb. 1978, for example (see p. 332, n. 43). I will argue against the assumption that suspense is one of the most basic and "natural" of our responses to literature (see p. 366 ff.).

appeal to our baser instincts, a distraction from more important questions of theme and symbolism, meaning an intention.

Literary criticism lacks a set of tools for the study and evaluation of suspense structures. Suspense is not meaning but absence of meaning. It is a gap between text and reader, a measure of the reader's failure to know all that there is to know. The reader of narrative approaches the text with the desire, conscious or unconscious, to subsume the text in his own experience, and to learn everything there is to learn, or that seems worth learning, about the text, and thus to place it in perspective, in the context of other books that he has read and the world he has experienced. He attempts to establish dominion over the text, and the critic tries to formalise that assumption of power, as a recent volume of critical essays, edited by Ian Gregor, suggests:³

When we discuss a novel it is only partially to hear another person's view, it is much more to find out what we ourselves think in order to possess the text more completely (pp. 52-53).

What of the text? Does it meekly submit to absorption into the wider frame of the reader's knowledge? Does it offer up its secrets in its first pages, or even in its last pages?

If a nineteenth-century text aspires to be considered a literary, rather than a popular text, it must reciprocate in the power struggle with the reader. It must refuse, or seem to refuse, to relinquish some of its secrets, to close all its suspense structures, even though its 'resolution' may offer answers to carefully selected questions or enigmas posed by the text. The literary text is thus characterised by its pseudo-genuflection to the reader, and its covert establishment of a residual autonomy. If answers were given to all questions raised by the text, and all the gaps in our understanding were filled, we would lose interest in the text from the moment when we completed our reading.

The popular or commercial novel, on the other hand, is designed for a consumer society; that is, it exists only to be assimilated or discarded. Such texts establish clearly-defined problems of plot, a precisely measured gap between text and reader, and offer satisfying answers to these questions. Such a cycle of question and answer is the traditional domain of suspense, and a type of suspense which will indeed concern us here. But I shall assume a wider definition of suspense, which allows for the gaps which are never, or only partially, filled, questions which are equivocally answered or forgotten. I shall attempt to analyse the aesthetic assumptions, problems and rhetorical techniques, of both complete and incomplete suspense structures.

3 *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, ed. Ian Gregor (London: Vision, 1980), Interchapter One.

Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (pp 37-38) distinguishes three basic terms in any critical theory or procedure; the author, the work and the reader⁴. Any critical practice must indeed align itself with these primary coordinates, and estimate or imply the relative importance of each in the production of meanings. Traditional literary criticism assumes that the author is the *sine qua non*, exercising a certain priority over text and reader by the very act of creation. In this historical perspective, the reader's task is to reconstruct the author's mind and emotional state at the moment of creation, or to establish his intentions and influences, with the assumption that the text is the author's attempt to embody his ideas or feelings in words. E D Hirsch is perhaps the foremost critic of the last two decades to attempt a defence of this critical emphasis⁵.

Or we can take the text, the verbal icon itself, as the crucial term, with its own meaning independent of the author's intention and the reader's interpretation⁶. A variety of critical approaches, from mid-century New Criticism to some types of formalism, have granted the text a certain autonomy and argue that its relationship to its author is problematic, obscure, or irrelevant. Instead of the simple notion that the author creates the text, it may be argued that we know nothing of the author, except insofar as he is himself created or given form by various texts, historical or literary⁷. Our experience of the text, in this perspective, is controlled by linguistic and cultural structures, and there are a finite number of correct or valid readings.

Once more, to go to a relativist extreme, it may be argued that the number of possible readings is infinite and arbitrary. The text has no meaning *per se*; the reader in his historical situation will create his own reading which will be forever unique and irrecoverable. Indeed, Barthes and others have asserted this principle as an ideal; the critic's task is to deconstruct the text, to multiply the number of possible meanings, and to break down the assumptions behind old modes of perception.⁸

4 Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961).

5 E D Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967). For Hirsch, the "permanent meaning is, and can be, nothing other than the author's meaning" (p. 216).

6 e.g., esp., W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, (Lexington, Kentucky: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1954).

7 This Barthesian notion has become commonplace in many critical circles. The idea is repeated several times in the essays collected in *The Modern English Novel: the reader, the writer and the work*, ed. G. Josipovici (London: Open Books, 1976), e.g. Jeremy Lane: "the writer is authorised by the work, which in turn demands the authorisation of the reader ... " ("His Master's Voice: the Questioning of Authority in Literature" pp. 113-29, p. 126).

8 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975). Barthes does not claim that it is always possible to open up the old "classic" texts, yet it remains

Instead of the author or the text determining or validating the reading experience, the hierarchy is reversed.

Each of these viewpoints is extreme because it asserts the pre-existence, and therefore autonomy of one term in the critical equation. Yet all the cases are arguable. I would prefer to adopt a more flexible approach, assuming, whenever it proves valuable, that the text is the most important element in the creation of meaning, determining the reading. At other times, it seems more useful to assume a reader, hypothetical perhaps, who responds to the text and discovers meaning or value in a way that was not necessarily anticipated by author or text. Or it may prove more interesting to build up a picture of an author who chose, or felt compelled, to write in a certain way.⁹ But I shall be primarily concerned with the relationship, or two-way power struggle, between text and reader, the textual strategies to create and control the reading, and the reader's attempts to understand and control the text.¹⁰

It is difficult to describe the shifting balance between these two forces. Thus it is helpful to identify clearly what is, at any given moment in our discussion, the hypothetical source of power. Otherwise, the historical reader, such as myself, who attempts to make sense of the text, may be confused with the reader who is assumed or created by the text. For the sake of convenience, I shall italicise author, reader, or text, when it is in the predicated position, when controlled or seen through the perspective of either the other two terms. For instance, it will be necessary to consider the kind of *reader* created or assumed by the text of *Bleak House*, but this *reader* may well differ considerably from any actual reader of the text.¹¹ Similarly, there are two authors, an author who expresses himself in a *text*, and controls a reader's response, and an *author* who is created by text or reader.

It may be argued that there is already a clear distinction in critical terminology between the historical and the *implied* author or reader.

the implicit ideal of his criticism: "Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (p. 4).

9 e.g. my consideration of Conrad's motivation in the presentation of suicides, pp. 278-85.

10 I am conscious that this is the reverse of what Barthes maintains the open text should try to do. The continuing popularity of the Victorian novel suggests that today's reader is still happy with the novel which attempts to control his responses, and that is a fair justification.

11 Wayne Booth is probably the first to establish the distinction in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 73. The concept of the implied reader is developed in Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974).

References to Dickens's texts are taken from the Oxford Illustrated Dickens Series, published by O.U.P. between 1947 and 1956. *Bleak House* was first pub. in book form in Sept. 1853.

But such phraseology carries with it an implicit suggestion that the first author or reader is somehow more real, significant, or accesible than his implied counterpart, and it perpetuates a criticism in which the “true” author must be the final self-identifying object of our enquiry. In the period of the novel under consideration, the age of what has been called the “classic” novel of “expressive realism”,¹² the typical novel controls one particular *reader*, who, it is hoped, does not differ too greatly from the actual contemporary reader. Indeed, it is necessary that there should be a close correspondence, otherwise the fragile structures of suspense, depending on the creation of a very particular set of hopes and expectations, break down.

12 Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 7 ff.

(ii) Suspense and Meaning

Criticism cannot escape the question of *meaning*, but this term has been forced to do too much work by today's numerous, conflicting critical approaches. It is necessary to distinguish clearly between one kind of meaning and another, and Leonard Meyer's distinction between *designative* and *embodied* meaning is a useful initial step.¹

When we refer to a text's *designative* meaning, we describe the relationship between the text and a subject beyond the text, something in an outside world which the author and reader are presumed to share.² *Embodied* meaning results from the relationship between reader and text as text, i.e., those aspects of the text which we distinguish as internal and dynamic; the development of the plot, the success or failure of characters, the exposition and solution of mysteries, etc.

Embodied meaning is necessarily sequential and dynamic because it describes the result in the reader's mind of a comparison between the present unit of the text (the *lexia*, as Barthes calls it)³ and the eidetic text, the gestalt recollection of what we already read, or the projection of what we have yet to read.

In practice, this is a difficult distinction to maintain because the two types of meaning co-exist and overlap. No narrative can exist in a self-referential vacuum because of the nature of language. Any instance of *parole* (e.g., the literary text) can only be understood in relation to previous usage, its present context, and other words which might have been selected but were omitted.⁴ Similarly, we might say that any given *lexia*, of whatever size, can only be comprehended in terms of its *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* relationships, which correspond approximately to our definitions of designative and embodied meaning.

We will be comparatively little concerned here with the paradigmatic structure, the designative meaning, the "horizontal" referents to a shared world beyond the text. The study of suspense takes us primarily

1 The idea is taken from Leonard B Meyer, *Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth-Century Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 6. Meyer's categories apply specifically to music rather than literature.

2 For the deconstructionists, such as Barthes, the world can only be perceived through a set of cultural codes, or as a set of interlocking texts. In *S/Z*, he asserts that "nothing exists outside the text" (p. 6).

3 Barthes's consideration, in *S/Z*, of Balzac's "Sarrasine" divides Balzac's text into over 500 units, or *lexias*, each a few lines long.

4 The concepts of *langue* and *parole* were developed by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (London: Peter Owen, 1974; 1st pub. 1915), pp. 13-14.

to the vertical axis, the syntagmatic structure of embodied meaning, which places the lexia in a sequence of connected events and meanings inside the narrative. For this reason, references here to meaning refer to the embodied meaning unless there are indications to the contrary. Or, to put it another way, concentrating on the figures rather than tropes, *in praesentia* rather than *in absentia*.

On the *cline* between the hypothetical extremes of pure designative meaning and pure embodied meaning is the understanding of narrative which we derive from previous experience of literature of a similar type, a metonymic recognition which might be called *generic competence*.⁵ Most suspense structures depend on the previous literary experiences of an audience and the possible endings which these suggest. Meaning relates text to context, and the context of our reading includes not only that part of the present text already read, but all other previous experiences.

Reading *Northanger Abbey*, for example, we can hardly avoid a conscious comparison of the narrative with other Gothic romances, if we have read any, while parts of *The Return of the Native* may be said to insist on comparison with *King Lear*.⁶ We do not realise to what degree our response to literature is controlled by our reading of other literature, even literature that we have long since “forgotten”. Our response to the heroine of any Victorian novel, for example, must take shape within the framework of the norms of all the other Victorian heroines we have ever encountered, even though none of these other heroines may pass through our conscious mind when we are reading the present text.

Suspense, in its most traditional sense, is felt when a comparison of the present text with all its implicit contexts yields no certainty either about how the text will continue, about what is happening or being said, or about how the parts that we have encountered already fit together.

This brings me to the most important tripartite division which I wish to make in the following pages, between what I shall call *prospective suspense*, *context inadequacy*, and *retrospective suspense*. This is a distinction of tense. *Prospective suspense* is our curiosity about events in the narrative future. *Context inadequacy* is an inability to make sense of the narrative present, the actions performed, the identity of participants, or the position within the narrative’s spatiotemporal sequence. *Retrospective suspense* is our desire to understand narrative events that have already “happened” but have not been fully specified.

5 The concept of the *cline* is widely used in present-day systemic linguistics; see, e.g. Margaret Berry, *An Introduction to Systemic Linguistics: 1 Structures and Systems* (London: Batsford, 1975), p. 26.

6 *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1952); Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (London: Macmillan, 1975; 1st pub. 1878).

Such a distinction depends upon a concept of the narrative present. The *narrative present* is the point in time in the fictional sequence reached by the first-time reader.⁷ The identification of the narrative present can be a more complex problem than might at first be apparent.

Even in “linear” narrative, the reader is often not restricted to a single perspective on fictional events. What, for example, do we feel is the narrative present of *Great Expectations*?⁸ One narrative present is that of the mature Pip sitting down to write his lifestory and recreating events that are, for him, in the distant past. If the reader shares this perspective, all suspense is retrospective. But that story clearly has its own narrative present, insofar as the reader is absorbed in the younger Pip’s spatiotemporal situation. It is possible to demonstrate, in fact, that this problem is implicit in any historical narrative, since any such text assumes a narrator who exists in a narrative present subsequent to the end of the story he narrates.

The use of even the simple perfect tense implies a fuller or later perspective, a framework of knowledge which is denied to the time-bound participants in the story.⁹ But many narratives, and not only those of the Victorian period, persuade us to forget that there is an implicit narrator or *author*, and to assume that characters are alive, determining their own destinies in a world that is not yet completed. The effectiveness of any structure of *prospective suspense* depends upon the reader’s acquired ability to forget the medium of historical narrative and to involve himself directly in fictional events. The *author* withdraws into the background in order to produce the illusion of fictional self-determination. As long as we feel that there is a future tense while reading, we can still feel prospective suspense.

The multiplication of narrative presents in the Victorian and modern novels may have an inhibitory effect upon our desire to know what happens next, but it may be seen to increase suspense in the wider sense. An ambiguity about the perspective a text is adopting at a given point is crucial to our experience of suspense, destabilising our grasp of meaning. The temporal ambiguity achieved by rapid transition from one narrative present to another is comparable to the wider complex of rhetorical strategies which come under the general heading of *ambiguous attribution*, which is the most important manifestation of *de-authorisation* in the classic realist text.

7 Here I am adopting the distinction between *fiction* and *narration* as clarified by John Mepham in his essay in Josipovici’s collection (pp. 149-85); see n. 7).

8 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: O.U.P., 1953; 1st pub. in book form 1862).

9 This is particularly relevant to our consideration of first-person narration. See pp. 201-04.

Ambiguous attribution is an ambiguity of focalisation, a controlled or uncontrolled confusion between the subject of the *énoncé* and the subject of the *énonciation*, or, rather, a difficulty in determining the subject of the *énonciation*.¹⁰

In the text as a whole, one may say that the subject of the *énoncé* is a character created by or enclosed within a third-person narrative, *Emma*, *Tess* or *Nostromo*, for example.¹¹ The subject of the *énonciation* is the implied *author* or narrator, a figure who is presumed, hypothetically at least, to stand beyond or outside the discourse. As we read *Emma*, for example, we feel a sense that there is someone, presumably the “Jane Austen” of the title-page, who knows the story before it is written and has fully understood every action and thought of the principal characters.

A proponent of deconstruction might argue that both of these subjects are created by the text and neither can be said truly to pre-exist the text, but, for our purpose, there is a very considerable distinction between the two figures. The authority of the *created* author is established and maintained by the fact that he knows the story and the reader does not.

So, for the first-time reader, there is a hierarchy of signifiers, statements which promise to mean more than others, or to take us closer to the macro-structure of the text’s completed meaning. The part of the text which is clearly attributable to the author is a far more reliable nexal indicator than that which presents events as they are filtered through a character’s perception.¹² But a character who is, at one moment, the subject of the *énoncé* may, at another, become effectively the subject of the *énonciation*, when it is his perceptions, unmediated by the *author*, which are offered by the text. Passages of internal monologue, or free indirect speech, allow a character to become the subject of the *énonciation* for an indefinite period. Since the character inside the narrative does not know the narrative future, his perceptions may well provide unreliable indications of what will happen, especially if the reader is not aware that the text is not authorised.

10 This distinction is borrowed from Tzvetan Todorov, “Language and Literature”, *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press 1970), pp. 125-33, esp. p. 132. The idea is further developed in Belsey’s *Critical Practice*, pp. 30-31.

11 Jane Austen, *Emma* (London: O.U.P., 1971; 1st pub. 1816); Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles: a Pure Woman* (London: Macmillan, 1974; 1st pub. 1891); Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo: a Tale of the Seaboard* (London: Dent, 1974; 1st pub. 1904).

12 The concept of the *nexal indicator* is taken from Eric S. Rabkin, *Narrative Suspense* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1973), pp. 53, 185. Nexal images are those which “ordinarily predict future states, e.g., the “thunderhead effect”” (p. 185).

In most sophisticated narrative, the figure of the *author* is only suggested indirectly, since he rarely characterises himself or refers to himself directly. Only occasionally are there metalinguistic indicators to divide authorised text from less reliable non-authorised text. Authorised text can only be identified by the absence of indications to the contrary, modifiers, qualifiers, or *operators*, such as “Emma thought that” or “it seemed that”. But, already, in the latter phrase, we glimpse something of the innate ambiguity of narrative discourse; it seemed to whom that? were they right?

The text rarely pauses to answer the second question directly. A gap between text and reader is opened up, and suspense (in this case, context inadequacy) of the most local kind is created. The perpetual evasiveness of the text registers only at an unconscious level; we know only that we desire to continue reading.¹³

Such ambiguities lend themselves to various critical treatments, especially deconstructive strategies, but I shall only examine instances of ambiguous attribution where they form a part of a deliberate rhetorical design. Most commonly, they occur, in the nineteenth century at least, where false or fruitless expectations are to be implanted in the *reader's* mind. In such cases, the secret unreliability of the text may be concealed, so that unreliable axioms appear to be authorised. Most obviously, operators may be omitted or taken for granted. In more radically de-authorised modern texts, from Henry James onwards, ambiguous attribution is the rule rather than the exception. The focalisation, or subject of the *énonciation* shifts frequently and imperceptibly, and difference “voices” are marked, if at all, only by minor stylistic differences, which the casual reader finds impossible to detect. The modern text does not establish its power in order to yield it gradually to the reader, but forces the *reader* to take an active part from the start, to *write*, in Barthes's terms.¹⁴ Here we will not question, as Barthes does, the validity of a textual aim to dictate the manner of its reading and interpretation.¹⁵

13 By reference to unconscious responses, I do not wish to imply that there is a clear distinction between conscious and unconscious suspense. The conscious expectations of one reader may be the unconscious feelings of another, and vice versa, according to their interests.

14 Barthes insists that the “writerly” is “our value” (S/Z, p. 4).

15 “Opposite the writerly text, then, is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly. We call any readerly text a classic text” (S/Z, p. 4).

(iii) Suspense and Destiny

Traditional suspense is a teleological structure and so is *destiny*. Both relate text read to text unread in hypothetical formulations which are subsequently confirmed or rejected. The distinguishing difference is one of expectational percentages. A sense of destiny is felt when one particular continuation or revelation seems inevitable within a particular structure.

Retrospectively, destiny is felt when it seems that the actual occurrence is the only thing which *could* have happened. When Henchard is killed, for example, we may feel that the conclusion has been inevitable since a certain point in the text. We may talk of as many categories of destiny as of suspense. Thus we might perceive retrospective destiny of character at the end of, say, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or retrospective destiny of theme at the end of Aesop's *Fables*.¹

Although we may say that prospective suspense and retrospective suspense are different in kind but not in value, we may detect an aesthetic distinction between prospective and retrospective destiny. In general, it is dangerous for a text to generate prospective destiny since this risks destroying the reader's motivation for continuing to read the text, especially if we feel sure of the continuation at more than one level.

For this reason, most classic texts attempt to maintain uncertainty in some important respect until the last possible moment. A sense of retrospective destiny, on the other hand, is certainly one of the pleasures of the classic text. The reader feels that he has fully mastered the narrative world, and created an overall framework for its comprehension, without loose ends or anomalies.

To a certain degree, therefore, the text's task is to maximise retrospective destiny and to minimise prospective destiny. It is by no means impossible to achieve the former without the latter. The successful detective novel and certain types of short story contrive revelations which, retrospectively, make the preceding text cohere and conform to an inevitable logic. Such texts are not to everyone's taste. The problem for the nineteenth-century novelist is that the reader may have no more than a partial belief that life is organised according to predestined patterns, reaching a conclusion towards which every action is seen retrospectively to contribute.

¹ George Orwell, *Collected Works* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1976); Aesop, *Fables*, ed. Sheila Schwartz (London: Octopus, 1979).

We too believe, or like to believe, in a certain measure of free choice and chance as well as a variety of causal forces, so most texts which strive for verisimilitude do not tie up all the loose ends in a sense of all-encompassing retrospective destiny. We tend to prefer conclusions which are appropriate and plausible rather than inevitable.²

In the third category, that of context inadequacy, it is less helpful to talk of a distinction between suspense and destiny. In the vast majority of traditional texts, including most of those of the nineteenth century, the audience knows, or, at least, thinks it knows, what is happening, and is only unsure about the past or the future. Such is the universality of the convention that the present situation is fully understood that it may be said to constitute one of the most basic of narrative pleasures.

The deliberate production of context inadequacy, the inability to discover the truth about the present-tense situation, is therefore a very dangerous ploy, a type of suspense which was usually only exploited for very specific purposes in the nineteenth-century novel.³ Without an understanding of the present situation (in what might be called the narrative foreground), it is difficult for the reader to assess the possibilities for the future development of the narrative, and his prospective suspense becomes destabilised and uncontrolled. For many readers, even today, this does not constitute a pleasurable response to a narrative.

Wolfgang Iser suggests a spectrum of possibilities for suspense, with the assumption that only the middle band of the spectrum is pleasurable:

A literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out, for reading is only a pleasure if it is active and creative... In this process of creativity, the text may either not go far enough, or may go too far, so we may say that boredom and overstrain form the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play (*The Implied Reader*, p.275).

In our terms, a sense of prospective destiny would create *boredom*, and context inadequacy would produce a feeling of *overstrain* in the typical reader. The reader's requirements in terms of what he should or

2 It is more important to create a sense of retrospective inevitability in a tragedy than in, say, a comedy, and we might construct a sliding scale according to genre.

3 In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy makes it very difficult for the *reader* to understand what is taking place in the opening chapters. Presumably, the motive for this is the establishment of a feeling of the implacable power and mystery of the heath at the beginning of the reading experience.

should not know do not remain a constant in different historical periods. The following chapter will examine the contention that man's demand for the not-known in his experience of reading narrative has shown a gradual increase over a very long period, culminating, in this century, in the decline of genre and the creation of context inadequacy for its own sake.⁴

But the nineteenth-century reader demanded a suspense without insecurity, an assurance that the text was in control of the narrative situation, creating a finite number of resolving possibilities. At the other end of the spectrum, problems are caused when questions posed by the text are answered for the reader by extra-textual sources of information. Few can resist reading the back cover or sleeve notes, which may well insist on telling half the story.

There has been a growth in importance of paperback reprints which make the apparent assumption that the reader knows the story already. Introduction, especially those written for editions aimed at students and scholars, may well include analyses of plot, character, or theme, written from the perspective of a completed reading.

If we read such introductions, we become second-time readers at a first reading, and cannot adopt the *reader's* role implied by the text. This type of introduction sacrifices suspense to a more complete grasp of designative meaning and authorial intention, with the presupposition that an understanding of these matters is more valuable or pleasurable than the experience of suspense.

Furthermore, such an introduction ignores the possibility that the thematic or didactic content of the work will only be effective as a persuasive force if it is clarified only at the end of the reading experience's journey of discovery.

Such scaffolding is, by definition, subsequent to, and not anticipated by, the text, and therefore destructive to the fragile processes of learning and discovery, whether on the level of plot or theme. Such distractions may include an author's prefaces to this own work, since these rarely enhance the effects achieved by the original text. We may categorise all such extra-textual influences as *background noise*, or, more simply, *noise*.

4 op cit. pp. 287-91, for a consideration of Conrad's creation of a sense of context inadequacy in order to evoke a sense of the epistemological uncertainty of everyday existence. See Meyer (n. 13, above), p. 16. Meyer distinguishes between *acoustical* and *cultural* noise. Acoustical noise results from inadequacies in the medium of transmission. *Cultural* noise refers to "disparities which may exist between the habit responses required by the musical style and those which a given individual actually possesses" (p. 16). Cultural noise will be a major factor in our consideration of the differences between *readers* and actual readers.

Just as the background noise in a concert hall detracts from our appreciation of a musical performance, so background noise interferes with our appreciation of narrative performance and the provisional meanings of suspense.⁵

For present purposes, textual noise will be assumed to include such aspects of the text as book-titles, chapter-titles, and running-titles at the tops of pages. Such titles tend to offer *proleptic glimpses*, that is, to summarise text which is not yet read, and to exercise a control on our expectations commensurate with the notice we take of them, which varies considerably from reader to reader.⁶ Whereas one reader will scrutinise the list of chapter-titles at the beginning of a narrative and deduce its possible development, another reader will turn straight to the first words of the text “proper”.

For this reason, titles which convey any kind of meaning or advance notification automatically introduce an important variable in the *reader's* understanding of the text, and control of the *reader's* response inevitably becomes less precise. The gradual disappearance of the chapter-title in the course of the Victorian period is one manifestation of the attempt to limit this type of background noise.⁷

5 In the nineteenth century, prefaces were ostensibly designed to elucidate the text to help us to read it without noise-interference. But many late 19th century novelists were concerned to maximise noise of whatever type, to increase the distance author to texts to reader.

6 The concept of the *proleptic glimpse* is based on Genette's idea of the *prolepsis*. A prolepsis is “any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later”, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 40.

7 Unfortunately, there is not space here for a statistical analysis of the use of chapter titles in Victorian novels. Within the careers of individual novelists, it is possible to see the declining popularity of the chapter title. Many of the early novels of George Eliot and Hardy tend to have chapter titles, while the later ones do not.

(iv) The Aristotelian Terminology of Suspense

Since suspense has been considered such a simple phenomenon, an unwieldy cudgel among the forensic tools of the novelist, there is no ready-made terminology to describe its rhetoric, intentions, and effects. Thus it is necessary to invent some new categories and appropriate some old terms.

Aristotle, the most perceptive of the early students of “literary” form, provides several crucial terms for my own analysis. Aristotle’s notion of tragedy is characterised by the twin ideas of *peripeteia* (peripety or reversal) and *anagnorisis* (discovery or recognition).¹ I shall use both of these terms, but, in the case of the latter, it is helpful to distinguish between two different types of recognition, that of character inside the dramatic situation, and that of reader or audience. Following traditional practice, I shall describe the moments of awareness of characters as recognitions.

The *anagnorisis* (plural, *anagnorises*) is the destination of every traditional suspense structure, the moment when the reader suddenly discovers the answers to the questions posed by the narrative. Characteristically, the moment of the *reader’s* discovery is no more than that, the experience of a single moment, prompted by a single sentence or a few lines of the text. Anagnorises may be said to conclude structures of prospective suspense and to dispel context inadequacy, but they are more easily recognisable as conclusions to structures of retrospective suspense.

In the detective novel, for example, the detective should be able to reveal the secret of the entire narrative in a few lines, so that numerous unexpected connections are made in the *reader’s* mind. The successful mystery plot is generally one which can be revealed by the indication of one key link which makes possible the understanding of every other element.

For instance, in one of the most successful of all mysteries, *Rebecca*, it is possible to give the *reader* the secret of the larger part of the text in no more than a couple of lines. Max admits to his wife, the narrator:²

1 *The Works of Aristotle*, trans. under editorship of W.D. Ross (Oxford: O.U.P., 1964), vol. XI. Original quotations are taken from *Aristotle: the Poetics*, “Longinus”: *On the Sublime*, *Demetrius: On Style* (London: Heinemann, 1953) (Aristotle, Longinus, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe).

2 Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: Gollancz, 1938).

“There never was an accident. Rebecca was not drowned at all. I killed her. I shot Rebecca in the cottage in the cove.” (xix 314).

In an instant, the *reader* can see that he was wrong in his long-standing, but unfounded, assumption that Max was devoted to his first wife.³ Although there are a few details still to be explained, nearly every aspect of the text so far now seems to make sense, and the *reader* experiences of the most extreme, perhaps *the* most extreme, of all narrative pleasures.

The anagnorisis created by a long text resembles the punch-line of a joke, an effect achieved by what Koestler calls *bisociation*:⁴

The effect of a joke may thus be described as the sudden clash of two swift-flowing, independent association streams in the listener’s mind. The clash may have the impact of *surprise*; and this can only be achieved if every contact between the two streams is avoided until they meet at the appointed junction (*Insight and Outlook*, p.27).

Suspense, like laughter is often seen as an automatic reflex, e.g. by Forster and Mrs Barbauld.

The literary anagnorisis combines two or more lexias of the text, revealing a connection which is difficult to anticipate because of the gap in reading time between the establishment of the different units to be connected. In *The Act of Creation*, first published in 1964, Koestler extends his theory of the bisociation to all kinds of creative activity, from the literary to the scientific, and asserts that the desire to achieve such pleasurable linkages provides the motivation for much creative and experimental activity.

In discussing the physiological aspects of the moment of bisociation or anagnorisis, Koestler makes the connection with the Aristotelian notion of *catharsis*:⁵

The Eureka cry is the explosion of energies which must find an outlet since the purpose for which they have been mobilised no longer exists; the cathartic reaction is an inward unfolding of a kind of “oceanic feeling”, and its slow ebbing away (p.88).

Bisociation links contexts in a new and unexpected way, and a similar principle of unfamiliarity might be said to constitute the difference between metaphor and metonymy (also dead metaphor), and to explain

3 This deception is a good example of the deceptive power of the *paralogism*. For discussion of this Aristotelian concept, see pp. 30-33.

4 Arthur Koestler, *Insight and Outlook: an Inquiry into the Common Foundations of Science, Art and Social Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1949); *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964).

5 According to Aristotle, a tragedy contains “incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions” (you can do this bit!) (*Poetics*, 1449b, 27-28; ch. vi).

the privileging of metaphor in our concepts of poetry and its pleasures.⁶ Irony too, when considered as a source of humorous pleasure, usually consists of a bisociation of some sort, whether through a disparity between content and style, or between expectation or intention and actuality.

At the risk of stretching Koestler's principle too far, the peripeteia (reversal) itself may be said to contrast one state of affairs with another. John Jones observes that peripeteiai are normally to be found in "a drama of frustrated expectation and intention, of bitter personal ironies" (*On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*, p. 48).⁷ For Jones there is a complementarity between the reversal and recognition which corresponds to my usage of anagnorisis and recognition:

Recognition is the concomitant, at the level of awareness in the stage-figure, of the "change" upon which the tragic action pivots - just as Aristotle's Reversal (*peripeteia*) is the concomitant, at the level of awareness in the audience, of this same change (p.52).

But Aristotle uses *reversal* to refer to the dramatic action itself, rather than the audience's awareness of it (or awareness of its imminence), and I shall retain the primary sense of a reversal in the fortunes or situations of characters, through some striking and decisive event.

The *reader* may or may not be forewarned that such a decisive change is going to take place. If not, it is probable that the description or revelation of the peripeteia will cause an anagnorisis similar in kind to that precipitated by the announcement of the solution of a mystery. As before, pleasurability corresponds roughly to the extensiveness of the *post-determination*. The sudden or surprising reversal forces the reader to reconsider the rest of the narrative, to achieve a new understanding of causal sequences, and to gain a new perspective on the characters involved.

Thus, as with the mystery solution, it may be aesthetically advisable that the *reader* should be made aware of the peripeteia at a specific instant in time, concentrating his recognition in a brief, pleasurable flash of understanding. The peripeteia itself may therefore be considered as one of the primary sources of pleasure in our experience of narrative, and the sensational narrative achieves its popularity both by maximising the number of peripeteiai and by sharpening each

6 *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), illustrates the wide variety of disciplines which now regard an understanding of metaphor as essential to their study and method.

7 John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962). Frank Kermode draws on Jones's pioneering study in his own consideration of peripety in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: O.U.P., 1967). p. 18.

individual “reversal”.⁸ But such pleasures are achieved at a considerable cost in terms of some of the other values that we look for in a narrative.

For the *peripeteia* to coincide with the *reader's* anagnorisis, it must come as a surprise, so *peripety* involves a foreshortening of the narrative, corners cut and causes imperfectly established or concealed. The concealment of causes prevents the pre-justification of narrative events, thus making the illusion of verisimilitude much more difficult to achieve. This is entirely a matter of textual choice and priority in presentation.⁹

To take a hypothetical example: *x* is to murder *y* at a certain point in the fiction or drama. If we follow the murderer's thoughts for a considerable period beforehand, as he deliberates how he will commit the crime, the murder, when it finally occurs, will constitute a *peripeteia*, but, because there is little surprise, the reader will not experience much of an anagnorisis. Or the text could present the murder as a *fait accompli*, revealing the murder to the reader *after* it is deemed to have occurred thus springing a surprise on the *reader*. In the latter case, the reader may well feel that the murder has been insufficiently justified by the preceding text and that there was insufficient motive or likelihood. But the sense of shock will not be diffused between the separate discoveries of capability, intention, and fulfilment.

In such instances, some sense of verisimilitude may be achieved by the activation of clues hidden within the preceding narrative, just as the detective's solution to a mystery is justified by the revelation of the clues which the *reader* had missed.¹⁰ In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for example, the text withdraws from the mind of its protagonist, so that the announcement of the murder of Alec comes as a considerable shock to the *reader*.¹¹ Tess's action is partly justified, in retrospect, when we remember some aspects of the preceding text, such as the incident in which Tess slaps Alec with her gauntlet.¹² “I feared long ago, when I struck him on the mouth with my glove, that I might do it some day for

8 There is no clear dividing line between the reversal and the narrative development which reverses some but not all elements of the preceding narrative. I will employ the term *peripeteia* in a wider sense than Aristotle who uses it specifically to refer to that point in the middle of the action when the hero's fortunes go from good to bad, or vice versa. Here the term will refer to any serious adjustment of the narrative situation.

9 See below, pp. 126 ff.

10 See the discussion of “sleepers” p. 255
Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, VII, lvi.

11 This incident is also discussed pp. 99-100.

12 *Tess*, VI, xlvii.

the trap he set for me in my simple youth, and his wrong to you through me" (ch. LVII, p.523 in OUP ed.)

The peripeteia forces us to revise our notions of Tess's character and the destination of the narrative, thus achieving the most important anagnorisis, or reversal of the *reader's* understanding, in this particular text.

In the following chapter, we will consider the attitudes of the classical world to suspense, literary or otherwise, but it is clear from the foregoing that Aristotle may be said to have understood something of the importance of recognition and reversal in literary structure. He was ahead of his time in his perception that a lack of knowledge, as well as the subsequent fulfilment of the desire to know, could be a source of pleasure in itself. For instance, in the *Rhetorica*, he catalogues the different pleasures felt by mankind:¹³

και το μανθανειν και το θαυμαζειν ηδυ ως επι το πολυ. εν μεν γαρ τω θαυμαζειν το επιθυμειν μαθειν εστιν, ωστε το θαυμαστον επιθυμητον, εν δε τω μανθανειν εις το καταφυσιν καθιστασθαι.

Learning things and wondering at things are also pleasant as a rule; wondering implies the desire of learning, so that the object of wonder is an object of desire; while in learning one is brought into one's natural condition (1371a, 30-34; Book 1, Chapter xi).

This has certainly not been self-evident in Aristotle's, or our own, culture. The key terms here are θαυμαζειν (*thaumazein*, to wonder), and μανθανειν (*manthanein*, to learn), or, in their noun forms, the concepts of pleasurable *thauma* and *mathesis*, wonder and learning, the equivalents in the world at large of literary suspense and resolution. Since Sidney, critics and psychologists have tended to make the assumption that the reader has a natural disinclination towards being taught by a work of art, but Aristotle does not make this presupposition.¹⁴ Only if the reader or viewer of tragedy feels a sense of

13 Greek text from *The "Art" of Rhetoric* (London: Heinemann, 1926), translation by W. Rhys Roberts from *The Works of Aristotle* XI (see n. 38).

14 *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones and J. Van Dorsten (Oxford: O.U.P., 1973). Sidney's widely influential *A Defence of Poetry* employs a variety of metaphors which insist on the unwillingness of the reader of literature to be taught. Yet poetry, unlike philosophy, contrives to teach us unawares:

The poet cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well enchanting skill of music; and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue - even as the child is often brought to the most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste, which, if one should begin to tell them the nature of *aloes* or *rhabarbarum* they should receive, would sooner take their physic at their ears than at their mouth (pp. 39-40).

wonder at what he does not know can he go on to experience the pleasure of learning.

Thauma is the only term which Aristotle had available to him which implied a state of ignorance without pejorative associations, but even wonder and curiosity have not enjoyed a high prestige amongst literary critics. E.M. Forster, for example, fits easily into the Sidneian tradition:

Curiosity is one of the lowest of the human faculties. You will have noticed in daily life that when people are inquisitive they nearly always have bad memories and are stupid at bottom (*Aspects of the Novel*, p.60).

One is inclined to question this as a general observation on human nature, but it proceeds from a deep-rooted assumption that a state of knowledge is natural and pleasurable, and that a state of ignorance is not. In the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle stresses the process of learning rather than the achievement:

αιτιον δε και τουτο, οτι μανθανειν ου μονον τοις φιλοσοφοις ηδιστον
αλλα και τοις αλλοις ομοιως, αλλ' επι βραχυ κοινωνουσιν αυτου.

The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it (1448b, 12-15; Chapter iv).

Aristotle's intuition of the pleasurability of this kind of learning is the corner-stone of his precocious understanding of the dynamics of literary response. A fair proportion of the *Poetics* is devoted to a consideration of the rhetorical means whereby a text controls its audience's knowledge and expectations in order to achieve a moment of pleasurable realization. His primary model is *Oedipus Rex*, a text which never quite makes up its mind whether to tell its audience its plot in advance, and which is consequently suspended uncertainly between the generic opposites of tragedy and mystery.¹⁵

Aristotle, as Dorothy L Sayers so persuasively demonstrates, was certainly moving towards an understanding of the structural properties of mystery, a genre of which there were as yet no obvious examples.¹⁶ His perspicacity in this respect is the result not so much of his observations of literature but of his understanding of logic and rhetoric, studies which he had himself largely pioneered, in particular his exploration of the syllogism and false syllogism.

The common acceptance of the assumption that man does not particularly enjoy learning may have contributed to man's inability to understand the enjoyability of suspense, insofar as suspense is the desire to learn something not already known.

15 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1954).

16 Dorothy L Sayers, "Aristotle on Detective Fiction" (lecture delivered at Oxford Mar. 1935), in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Gollancz, 1946), pp. 178-90.

Although Aristotle followed Plato's example in insisting that rhetoric should be grounded in truth,¹⁷ his criteria seem to be primarily aesthetic in his consideration, in the *Poetics*, of the rhetoric of deception. The possibilities of deceiving an audience are described most thoroughly in Chapter Twenty-four:

Δεδίδαχεν δε μαλιστα Ωμηρος και τους αλλους ψευδη λεγειν ως δει. εστι δε τουτο παραλογισμος. οιονται γαρ ανθρωποι, οταν τουδι οντος τοδι η η γινομενου γινηται, ει το υστερον εστιν, και το προτερον ειναι ι η γινεσθαι; τουτο δε εστι ψευδος. διο δει, αν το πρωτον ψευδος, αλλ ο δ'ο τουτου οντος αναγκη ειναι η γενεσθαι η, προσθειναι; δια γαρ το τουτο ειδεναι αληθες ον, παραλογιζεται ημων η ψυκη και το πρωτον ως ον. παραδειγμα δε τουτο εκ των Νιπτρων.

Homer more than any other has taught the rest of us the art of framing lies in the right way. I mean the use of paralogism. Whenever, if A is or happens, a consequent, B, is or happens, men's notion is that, if the B is, the A also is ... but that is a false conclusion. Accordingly, if A is untrue, but there is something else, B, that on the assumption of its truth follows as its consequent, the right thing then is to add on the B. Just because we know the truth of the consequent, we are in our own minds led on to the erroneous inference of the truth of the antecedent. Here is an instance, from the *Bath-story* in the *Odyssey* (1460a, 19-25; Chapter xxiv).

The paralogism, sometimes rendered as *fallacia consequentis*, or simply as "fallacy",¹⁸ is the basic source of deception in most mysteries, especially the detective story.

Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, first published in 1926, the year before Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, is structured around two such typical paralogisms.¹⁹ The first concerns the position of the narrator, who also happens to be the murderer. On the left-hand page facing the title-page, we are given the following helpful information:

M.Poirot, the hero of "The Mysterious Affair at Stiles" and other brilliant pieces of detective deduction, comes out of his temporary retirement like a giant refreshed, to undertake the investigation of a peculiarly brutal and mysterious murder. Geniuses like Sherlock Holmes often find a use for faithful medio-critics like Dr Watson, and by a coincidence it is the local doctor who follows Poirot round, and himself tells the story. Furthermore, what seldom happens in these cases, he is instrumental in giving Poirot one of the most valuable clues to the mystery.

Because Dr Sheppard is obviously like Dr Watson in certain respects, as the bluff, somewhat slow-witted, recorder of a detective's exploits, we assume that he is like Dr Watson in other respects, notably in terms of

17 *Rhetorica*, L.I, xii; 1355a, 31-32.

18 e.g. Hamilton Fyfe's translation of *paralogismos* in the Heinemann (1953) edition of the *Poetics* (see n. 38).

19 Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: Collins, 1926).

his integrity. The furore caused by the solution of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* suggests that almost every contemporary reader did make this paralogistic assumption.²⁰ We are told that Sheppard is instrumental in giving Poirot *one* of his most valuable clues, and we make the not unreasonable assumption that he provided no more than one clue; in fact, he leaves a large number of clues by which he might have been detected.

As narrator, Sheppard tells no lies, but, by telling less than the whole truth, he achieves the same effect. For instance, here is his account of the telephone call which apparently calls him to attend the corpse:

I ran down the stairs and took up the receiver.

"What?" I said. "What? Certainly, I'll come at once."

I ran upstairs, caught up my bag, and stuffed a few extra dressings into it.

"Parker telephoning," I shouted to Caroline, "from Fernly. They've just found Roger Ackroyd murdered." (p.49)

The reader makes the paralogistic assumption that the voice at the other end of the line is that of Parker and that Parker has announced the death of Ackroyd. In fact, neither assumption is correct.²¹

Our experience of the everyday world is dominated by assumptions of this kind, as gestalt psychologists have able demonstrated.²² This type of inference is the opposite of bisociation since it links units of experience only because they have been habitually linked in similar situations in the past, in a process of non-creative association. The mystery teaches us to look circumspectly at our everyday notions of cause and effect.

In the following chapter, we will consider some aspects of the history of the concept of suspense, revealing something of the disrespect and disregard in which suspense was held in all but its most recent history. Subsequent chapters are arranged by author rather than concept. The authors chosen, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Dickens, Hardy, and Conrad, are arguably the most well-known English novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed they have been primarily chosen for this reason. It is possible to discuss their novels in

20 For an account of the reception of *Roger Ackroyd*, see Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: an Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (London: Collins, 1980), Chapter One.

21 The corpse has not yet been discovered, and Sheppard must be there when this happens so that he can remove a vital piece of evidence during the ensuing panic. So he arranges a telephone call from a man who is leaving the country, and deceives his sister (and the reader) in this fashion. Afterwards he pretends that the call must have come from the murderer, impersonating Parker.

22 See, e.g., E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon, 1960), pp. 220-22, 227, and elsewhere.

largely unfamiliar ways with the assurance that the texts themselves will be reasonably well-known.

It is not my intention to imply that each of these novelists exploits a different type of suspense which is unique to that novelist alone. There are some distinguishing characteristics which will emerge in the course of analysis, but the primary factor affecting the type of suspense is genre, and it would have been equally convenient to organise different sections according to the different popular genres of the period.

Some Aspects of the History of the Concept of Suspense

(i) Ideas of Suspense embodied in Classical Mythology and Literature

E.M. Forster had no doubt that because suspense was the crudest aspect of narrative it must also have been the first. Neanderthal man would have asked for nothing more than a story:

What would happen next? The novelist droned on, and as soon as the audience guessed what happened next they either fell asleep or killed him. (*Aspects of the Novel*, p.18)

Was suspense the first narrative pleasure? In this section we will question Forster's assumption and attempt to demonstrate that, far from feeling suspense and little more, the audiences of bygone times may actually have required *less* suspense from their narratives and poems, and felt less pleasure in what suspense there was.

Explanations of the pleurability of suspense have almost invariably been goal-oriented. The simplest account of the phenomenon is that we like discovering how things turn out. In that case, would we not prefer the same story told in half the time so that we can find out what happens sooner? Evidently not, since any story can be condensed and further condensed by eliminating the details of the narrative.¹ We enjoy a resolution more because we have been forced to wait for it, but there is more to it than that.

If we divide our experience of narrative into two stages, suspense and resolution, we can say that both are pleasurable in their different ways. But, as a percentage of our reading time, resolutions have declined through the history of narrative, so that they are now of minimal importance compared with the long periods spent in a state of suspense.

The Greeks and Romans told themselves stories, of course, and those who enjoyed listening to them presumably enjoyed certain types of

¹ See e.g., Vladimir Nabokov, *Laughter in the Dark: a Novel* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961; 1st pub. in Russian in 1933), which summarises the complete story to follow in its first paragraph.

suspense which these stories engendered. But new, purely fictional, stories were rare; most were drawn from myth, legend and history, a comparatively small corpus of material which had become common knowledge.

Furthermore, it was common to eliminate the residue of prospective suspense by summarising the main events of the story in advance, and by distorting the temporal sequence of the story, beginning *in medias res*, narrating the conclusion first and then showing *how* it was reached.

This technique is common in epic narrative of the classical period but tragic drama, from the earliest times, tends to present its story in linear fashion, perhaps because of the technical problems involved in numerous chronological shifts. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle sketches a tragic parabola, half complication (*desis*), as far as a turning-point (*peripeteia*), followed by a gradual working-out or resolution (*lusis*).² While this is a pleasantly symmetrical pattern, it hardly corresponds to our experience of most narratives now, which are not fifty per cent suspenseful tension and fifty per cent resolution.³

The resolution is the most difficult part of the modern novel because it often fails to do justice to the multiplicity of narrative lines that have been projected in our imaginations during the period of suspense. The ending may be bathetic because it settles for one ending at the cost of all others. In some sense, we still desire the resolution and the need for a resolution is stronger in some readers than others, but, just as Victorians enjoyed having to wait months in order to resolve a novel which had been serialized, so many of us today prefer long-running serials on television or radio which put off the resolution indefinitely and keep us in a continuous state of suspense.

The reading public's demand for suspense is not a constant throughout history. This may be judged from the fact that, nowadays, we may insist on hearing *new* stories, but this has not always been the case. Before the growth of the novel as a commercial form in the eighteenth century, it was rare indeed for the writer of narrative or playwright to make up his own plot. Shakespeare, for example, often altered history and folklore for his own purposes but, in outline, the majority of his plots and characters are borrowed from the various sources that were available to him.

2 *Poetics*, 1455b, 24-29; Chapter xviii.

3 This Aristotelian theory has, however, exerted a strong influence over Shakespeare and many English novelists.

Similarly, in reading Chaucer, we often feel that the story is only the medium within which the poet can display his skills. Chaucer and Shakespeare do not go to the classical extremes of telling us the story at the beginning, so many readers will experience the cycle of suspense and resolution on the level of plot, but this is comparatively incidental to the major imaginative enterprise. But one of the major distinguishing features of the novel (indeed, what makes it *novel*)

Two possible explanations for the unwillingness of artists in time past to invent their own plots suggest themselves; either they did not understand that their potential audience enjoyed being kept in suspense by a story which they had not heard before, or the audiences themselves actually gained less pleasure from new stories. In fact, there is probably more than a little truth in both explanations. If other audiences have not gained as much pleasure from suspense as we do now, it is difficult to establish exactly why.

But one can offer a few provisional explanations. One possible reason is that narrative supplements life in that it provides pleasures which, in any given period, are not found in sufficient abundance in our everyday lives. In the most general terms, we may observe that, in any previous period of history, everyday life was more risky and suspenseful than it is today. The average man faced a much greater and more immediate threat of illness and death. People were not protected from poverty and disease in the way that they are today by trades unions and Welfare State, while plague and war were constant threats for many. For the majority who believed in hell and damnation, there was a permanent worry that one might be headed for endless torment if one did not mend one's ways.

There was no clear agreement on what constituted a life of suffering righteousness to guarantee that hell's flames could be avoided. In the sixteenth century, for example, there was a risk that if you could not demonstrate that you had changed your religious beliefs every few years you might be condemned as a heretic or even as a witch. On the other hand, if you did not stand up for what you believed to be right, you might compromise your chances of winning a place in heaven. As soon as that threat was dissipated, the Spanish Armada loomed ominously, and so on. One year there might be plague, the next fire, one simply did not know.

This indeed was the problem, the widespread ignorance about so many aspects of the universe man lived in. On every level, our ancestors did not feel that they understood the basic mysteries of life. They did not understand what made an apple fall to the ground, never mind the complexities of their own bodily functions. Scientific progress may have compromised the poetry of the rainbow, but it has at least created a

situation in which man feels that he understands a great deal of what helps him live from day to day.

The increasing prominence of narrative suspense in the last two or three hundred years suggests that now there is not enough uncertainty in our everyday lives. In times when everyday lives provides sufficient uncertainty, pastoral, the least suspenseful of literary genres, is likely to be a popular recreation. Indeed, Christian mythology, which provides the basis of most of Western man's understanding of himself, was dominated by an image of a pastoral heaven in which life's suspense would be resolved as perpetual security. It seemed self-evident that a condition in which need, desire, pain and uncertainty would no longer be felt was the happiest of all states, and there was no need to ask in what non-suspenseful activities the soul in heaven would pass its time.

The patterns of classical mythology are similar in this respect. If we consider a mythology as a means whereby a society learns to dramatise its understanding of itself, classical mythology also reveals a fundamental fear of uncertainty, insecurity, desire and temptation. Athens, unlike Rome perhaps, was renowned for its freedom of thought and liberalism, but this is hardly borne out by the repressive stories which it told itself. Again, it would be possible to discover ways in which life itself was sufficiently uncertain for these two civilisations.

Greece and Rome both lie on the margin between two massive continental plates and thus occupy a region of earthquakes and volcanoes, such as Vesuvius. For us, the volcano might symbolise suspense of the most negative kind because, for those who live near it, there is a powerless waiting for catastrophe, and the only possible "conclusion" to such a suspense structure is personal disaster. Athenian civilisation was always threatened by enemies from abroad, Persians or Spartans, while the Roman world was also kept in a state of parlance by external wars, internal revolutions, and weak government.

Despite Aristotle's theories, the literature of the ancient world continued to turn its audience into the equivalent of second-time readers, and the major type of suspense, where there was suspense at all, was theme suspense, inviting the audience to enjoy a new handling of an old story. Virgil's *Aeneid* is a good example of the non-linearity of classical epic-structure, telling its story with numerous inversions and often summarising the action in advance.⁴ The first eleven lines of the poem are typical:

Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris

4 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ed. J.W. Mackail (Oxford: O.U.P., 1930); *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. J.W. Mackail (London: Macmillan, 1937).

Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit
litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
vi superum, saevae memorum Iunonis ob iram,
multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem
inferretque deos Latio, genus unde Latinum
Albinique patres atque altae moenia Romae.

Musa mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso
quidve dolens regina deum tot volvere casus
insignem pietate virum, tot adire labores
impulerit. tantaene animis caelestibus irae?

I sing of arms and the man who came of old,
a fated wanderer, from the coasts of Troy to
Italy and the shore of Lavinium; hard driven
on land and on the deep by the violence of
heaven, by reason of cruel Juno's unforgetful
anger, and hard bestead in war also, ere he
might found a city and carry his gods into
Latium; for whom is the Latin race, the lords
of Alba and high-embattled Rome.

Muse, tell me why, for what attaint of
her deity, or in what vexation, did the Queen
of heaven urge on a man excellent in goodness
to circle through all those afflictions, to
face all those toils? Is anger so fierce in
celestial spirits? (Book I, 1-11)

The major part of the plot, which most of Virgil's audience would know already, is summarised in the first verse-paragraph, and the second verse-paragraph serves to initiate a little theme suspense: why should Juno, as representative of the gods, choose to make Aeneas struggle through all those afflictions before he can found Rome?

For the most part, however, the *Aeneid* aims to generate the "anti-suspenseful" pleasures of ritualised participation in the repetition of stories which are held to give purpose and meaning to existence, and which assert one community's sense of its own identity.⁵

Although Virgil is representative of the Augustan age, one of the more conservative periods in Rome's conservative history, the *Aeneid* is a useful starting point for an exploration of classical attitudes to suspense. *Suspense*, as an English word, is, of course, derived directly from the Latin verb *suspendo, suspendere*: to hang, hang up, choke to death by hanging, hang at the whipping-post, and various related meanings, along with its adjectival form, *suspensus-a-um*; suspended, in suspense. It is not the only Latin verb meaning *to hang*; equally

5 The best consideration of suspense, or the lack of it, in the *Aeneid* is that of George E. Duckworth, *Foreshadowing and Suspense in the Epics of Homer, Apollonius, and Vergil* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1933).

common is *pendeo*, *pendere*, but this verb seems to have been generally reserved for inanimate objects.⁶

Suspendere was generally used of persons and states of mind although, in English, we tend to use *hang* for the former and *suspend* (or *suspense*) for the latter. *Suspendere* is used in both these senses in the *Aeneid*. When Aeneas visits the Underworld in Book Six, there is a reference to Prometheus and other criminals punished in Tartarus, itself an abyss suspended beneath the rest of Hades' kingdom: "aliae panduntur inanes/suspensae ad ventos..." ("some are hung stretched to the viewless winds...") (VI, 740-741).

If Prometheus's physical condition, tied to a rock while his liver is pecked out daily, can hardly be described as pleasurable, nor can the situations of characters whose states of mind are described as *suspensus*. In Book Five, for example, suspense is balanced against joy: "hic patris Aeneae suspensam blanda vicissim/gaudia pertemptant mentem..." ("Now joy in turn overspreads and lulls lord Aeneas' anxious soul") (V. 827-29). At other points it is translated as *thrill* or *terror*.⁷ In Book Two, Aeneas tells Dido:

et me, quem dudum non ulla iniecta movebant
tela neque adverso glomerati exagmine Grai,
nunc omnes terrent aerae, sonus excitat omnis
suspensum et pariter comitique onerique timentem.

And I, lately moved by no weapons launched
against me, nor by the thronging bands of my
Grecian foes, am now terrified at every
breath, startled by every noise, thrilling
with fear alike for my companion and my burden (II, 726-29)

Here and elsewhere, suspense is associated with fear, anxiety and the need for release, always an unpleasurable state.

Indeed, it would have been difficult to use the word in a positive sense because of its basic association with that most traditional of all forms of capital punishment and torture, hanging. In most primitive societies, death by hanging was not achieved by the victim falling from a certain height, but by slow strangulation.⁸ This was the most terrible punishment that society could find to avenge itself against those individuals who had transgressed its law. Instantaneous forms of death have never been so popular because they do not allow the victim

6 Details are taken from Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1979).

7 *Aeneid*, III, 372; IV, 9.

8 This was, at least, the intention, although it is doubtful whether the victim could be kept alive for a long period in this fashion.

(who is literally kept in a state of suspense for as long as possible) or the large audience to feel life slowly ebbing away.

Christ's crucifixion is one of the most extreme examples of suspended torture; in this variation the victim might survive for hours, or perhaps even days, while he is subjected to any amount of physical and verbal abuse from his captors. One of the most important features of this type of suspense was the absolute powerlessness of the victim to affect his fate; any movement that he made would only increase the pain.

In this respect, hanging might be seen as a dramatised form of classical man's conception of his relationship with the gods above (either on Mount Olympus, one of the highest points of the known earth, or as the stars and planets to which the gods gave their names). In myth, and much Greek and Roman philosophy, mortal man was conceived as suspended in a similar powerless state, unable to control a destiny which had already been decided by one or other of the capricious gods.⁹ The most that one could hope for was that the right gods would look kindly on one's endeavours. For example, at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, admittedly one of the earliest classical texts, it is uncertain whether Poseidon, who hates Ulysses, or the other more sympathetic gods will gain control of the hero's fate as he returns from Troy to Ithaca.

Fate was no abstract, impalpable concept; there were three Fates (Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos) who, amongst others, were seen as controlling human affairs.¹⁰ Man did not have to do very much to offend at least one god.

But the very worst criminals were those who aspired to the condition of the gods or who coveted knowledge, power or wealth, in other words, those who thought to change their present states. In Tartarus, such criminals were given punishments which characteristically put them in a state of permanent suspense or pain where they continually desire to change their present condition but are totally powerless to do so. Book Six of the *Aeneid* alludes to some of the more famous of the occupants of Tartarus, but their stories were already well-known to every Greek and Roman audience.

Tantalus, who gave to the Greeks one word to describe conditions of negative suspense, attempted to ridicule the reputed omniscience of the gods by serving them at a banquet with the roasted flesh of his own

9 This is especially true of the earliest surviving literature but we can see a development towards a more complex view of causation through Homer's career. See Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley, California: Univ. of California Press, 1971).

10 Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. S.H. Butcher and A. Lang (London: Macmillan, 1906).

son, Pelops, or (in other versions) betrayed the gods' secrets. For these crimes, Tantalus was assigned to Tartarus and a state of perpetual thirst. He stood in a pool, his chin level with the water, yet, each time he tried to drink, the water ran away. Above his head were all kinds of delicious fruits but, when he reached up to seize a branch, winds whirled it high above his reach.

Sisyphus, once king of Corinth, who attempted to cheat death, was condemned to a similar tortuous cycle of hope and disappointment. Until eternity, he has to push a heavy rock up a steep slope but, just as he is about to reach the top, the rock suddenly rolls back down to the bottom, and he has to start his task all over again. Tityos, in a version of the Prometheus story, is suspended from a rock because he challenged the power of the Olympians, also powerless as he endures a cycle of repeated tortures.

Ixion's cycle is more literal; he is bound to a wheel which he is powerless to prevent forever turning. Meanwhile, the forty-nine daughters of Danaus, who killed the sons of Egypt on their wedding night, must attempt to fill a sieve with water, another task which can never be completed, another suspense structure which ends in frustration. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas sees groups attempting to dine at tables stocked with dainties, but their hunger is never appeased because a Fury would snatch away the food from their lips.¹¹

Other sinners were perpetually confronted with the sight of rocks suspended precariously above their heads, keeping them in a state of constant anxious alarm.¹² It is assumed that the worst fate that can befall mankind is not pain itself but the fear of pain and the cycle of hope for release from torture and repeated disappointment.

During Aeneas's visit, Phlegyas, in his misery, gives counsel to all: "discite iustitiam moniti et non temnere divos" ("*Learn by this warning to do justly and not to slight the gods*") (VI, 620).

But Virgil hardly needs to emphasize the message which is implicit in so many of the classical myths, not just in those concerned with Tartarus. Man is to avoid all situations where he will be prey to temptation, lust, fear, or desire for wealth, knowledge, or power, because he may not be able to avoid the trap which confronts him. Orpheus, for example, is also granted passage to the Underworld in his attempt to rescue Eurydice, but, if he is to succeed in escorting her out

11 *Aeneid*, VI, 603-07.

12 *Aeneid*, VI, 601-03.

of the Underworld, he must refrain from looking at her on the way out.¹³

Pandora, in turn, was sent to mankind as a temptation in herself (she was the first woman), and also herself kept in a state of suspense because of the box which she must carry around with her, but which she is not allowed to open. Eventually, curiosity gets the better of her, as it always seems to, and she opens the box, thus releasing a torrent of plagues and ills upon an unsuspecting world.

Everyman is unlikely to be able to withstand such temptations, so his best tactics are to avoid all such situations where he feels incomplete in his present state. Only heroes like Ulysses and Aeneas are able to adhere to their allotted course in the face of all temptation.

The *Odyssey* consists, in the main, of a series of temptations which are placed in Ulysses's path to prevent him from returning to Ithaca. After his sailors eat the lotus, symbol of a life of pleasure, Ulysses has to drag them away from the island. In a variation on the Pandora's box story, Aeolus gives Ulysses a bag of winds which he is forbidden to open. But when Ulysses is asleep, his crew decide that the bag must contain treasure and so open it, thus releasing winds which blow them in the wrong direction.

There are numerous enchantresses who symbolize the attractions of female sexuality and the necessary results of sexual desire. Circe turns her victims to swine while the Sirens would lure man to his death by their beautiful songs. Calypso falls in love with Ulysses and entertains him magnificently, offering him not only himself by the gift of immortality, while Nausicaa also deploys her charms in the hope of winning the hero's love. But Ulysses shows us exactly what should be done with all such female temptations.

Sometimes it is almost impossible to adhere to the pre-determined course, the disciplined *via media*, such as when the ship must pass between Scylla and Charybdis.¹⁴ The pattern of interdiction and temptation can be repeated indefinitely until, at last, Ulysses alone survives the arduous journey and returns to Penelope, who has herself survived continuous temptation. Aeneas, of course, but also discipline himself if he is to overcome similar challenges and complete his mission to found Rome.

13 For one of the earliest references to the myth, see *The Odes of Pindar*, trans. C.M. Bowra (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1969), Pythian Odes, IV, 177.

14 Aeolus's story is to be found at *Odyssey*, X, 1-56; Circe and Odysseus, X, 132-574; Calypso, V, 117-228; Nausicaa, VI, 184-331; Scylla and Charybdis, XII, 201-59.

In terms of their attitude to suspense in all its forms, we can see that Greek and Roman myths reveal an essential homogeneity. But the Bible itself, which has dominated our own culture's assumptions about most aspects of existence, is also full of cautionary tales which demonstrate that all situations of suspenseful temptation are to be avoided. Lot's wife, for example, is, somewhat capriciously, turned into a pillar of salt because she could not resist the temptation to look behind her. Most important of all is the story of the mother of mankind who could not resist the temptations placed in her way by the devil.¹⁵ Just as, today, we may be kept in a state of narrative suspense, coveting knowledge of the conclusion of the story, so Eve longed to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge, with disastrous consequences.

Milton's rendering of the story in *Paradise Lost* is, like the epic visions of Homer and Virgil, comparatively orthodox in its acceptance of the assumptions implicit in the old stories. Before the arrival Satan, Adam and Eve do not experience any *excessive* desires for knowledge, pleasure, etc., so when Satan sees them embracing he says to himself:¹⁶

Sight hateful, sight tormenting: Thus these two
 Imparadised in one another's arms
 The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill
 Of bliss on bliss, while I to hell am thrust,
 Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,
 Among our other torments not the least,
 Still unfulfilled with pain of longing pines ... (IV, 505-11)

Here joy is contrasted with desire, and the desire for knowledge was the deadliest of all the fierce desires. The reader of *Paradise Lost*, as of the *Aeneid*, experiences little prospective suspense, at least so far as the plot is concerned, not only because he knows the story already, but because the plot is summarised in the first part of the first sentence of the poem, and a knowledge of the complete story is assumed throughout.

Paradise Regained, in turn, structures itself around Christ's temptations in the wilderness, temptations to the senses, to the desire for earthly honour, and finally, of course, to the desire for knowledge. This, the greatest of all temptations, may seem inappropriate in Christ's story, but his reply represents the standard answer to this temptation:

Think not but that I know these things, or think
 I know them not; not therefore am I short
 Of knowing what I ought: He who receives

15 Genesis xix, 26; iii, 6

16 *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968).

Light from above, from the fountain of light,
No other doctrine needs, though granted true;
But these are false, or little else but dreams,
Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm (IV, 286-92)

Man may seek enlightenment, but not knowledge, and light is the free gift of God, the fountain of light. Suspense, as a state of ignorance, has always been linked with darkness which, in turn, has generally been associated with evil. Thus, even when suspense has been recognized as pleasurable, it has created a feeling of guilt as a forbidden pleasure. It would be impossible here to give much indication of the extent to which the antithesis of light and darkness has conditioned our understanding of the fundamental elements of experience, but it may hold the key to an understanding of man's failure to see suspense in a positive perspective.

Milton (unlike Shelley in *The Triumph of Life*)¹⁷ always uses light in a positive sense and darkness as an indication of negative values, while the same is true of Virgil, as W.R. Johnson makes clear in *Darkness Visible*.¹⁸

It is quite logical that a cultural mythology which reveals a deep distrust of suspenseful situations should picture a heaven in which suspense and related emotions would be eliminated, and this is indeed the case. Anchises, for example, in his pastoral Elysium knows everything that there is to know and therefore experiences no suspense. He is able to give Aeneas a glimpse of the future history of Rome, at least as far as Virgil's time. Aeneas is curious about the souls which he sees drinking in the Lethean streams of forgetfulness in order to return to second bodies. He asks his father why this happens:

"dicam equidem nec te suspensum, nate, tenebo"
suscipit Anchises atque ordine singula pandit.

"I will tell," rejoins Anchises, "nor will I hold thee in suspense, O my son."
And he unfolds all things in order one by one. (VI 722-23).

Here, at last, is Aeneas's reward for his dangerous trip to the Underworld, and there is little doubt that we are to regard it as a valuable one.

The Christian conception of Paradise has been remarkably homogeneous in its pastoral emphasis and its assumption that man wishes to escape from all emotions which rely on time for their

17 *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), IV, pp. 167-85.

18 W.R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's Aeneid* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1976).

fulfilment. When, like the poet of Psalm 23, man spends his life in the shadow of death, it is inevitable that he will find comfort in pastoral vision and, although the form has declined in popularity over the last two centuries, it has regained much of its appeal in periods of war and their aftermath. Koestler, for example, in *Insight and Outlook*, published shortly after the Second World War, assumes an aesthetic theory which corresponds to the pastoral vision, in his analysis of laughter as a release of tension:¹⁹

Now de-tension is the prototype of all pleasurable sensation, regardless of whether the tension was originated by hunger, sex or fear (p. 58).

In the writings of a more settled period of his life, Koestler suggests that tension itself might be pleasurable, and that man needs the ever-recurring cycles of tension and release, excitement and relaxation.²⁰ It is possible that the novel has assumed a position of such importance in modern society because it offers the reader a satisfying measure of control over this cycle.

But it is curious that man has always emphasized one half of the sequence, paradisaic stasis, as the goal of his endeavours. Such myopia may be explained by the imbalance which has been introduced into the system by social forces which have placed the individual in situations of negative suspense and unproductive tension, suspense structures over which the individual has no control or whose only possible conclusion is personally disastrous.

¹⁹ See p. 332 n. 41.

²⁰ In *The Act of Creation*, Koestler offers a very different perspective on the sources of pleasure, recognising both halves of the cycle of tension and release:

(ii) Early Hostility to the Concept of Suspense

'Suspense' is not a common word in this country before the Renaissance, and in the sixteenth century it is usually only found in legal documents. A case could be held "in suspense" if no verdict was reached at a first trial. Shakespeare does not use the word at all except at the end of the Second Part of *King Henry VI*, a play whose authorship is disputed. When Suffolk is arresting Gloucester for crimes against the state, the King says:¹

My Lord of Gloucester, 'tis my special hope
That you will clear yourself from all suspense:
My conscience tells me you are innocent (III. i. 139-41)

In this context, however "suspense" seems to be no more than a useful synonym for "suspicion" which will the metre, and "suspense" is occasionally used in this sense in subsequent documents, perhaps helping to give the word its negative colouring.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *suspense* is only used in neutral and highly pejorative senses. In Book Two of *Paradise Lost*, Satan tries to find a volunteer amongst his fellow devils to go to the new world that God has created:

This said, he sat; and expectation held
His look suspense, awaiting who appeared
To second, or oppose, or undertake
The perilous attempt ... (II, 417-20)

Satan's anxiety is not presumed to be a pleasurable state here, nor is it in *Samson Agonistes* when a messenger has brought the tidings that Samson is dead. The messenger hesitates before telling Manoa, who exclaims: "Suspense in news is torture, speak them out" (line 1569). Sir Richard Steele makes fun of one type of suspense in the *Spectator*,²

1 *The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth*, ed. Andrew S. Cairncross (London: Methuen, 1957).

2 Addison, Steele, and others, *The Spectator* (4 vols.) (London: Dent, 1958), II, p. 347 (Jan. 25th 1712). Steele rails against the busy young men about town who, as soon as they arrive at one house, profess they have to leave for some other engagement, and so on indefinitely. Thus they are always living in the future rather than the present:

For the Folly is, that they have persuaded themselves they really are busy. Thus their whole Time is spent in Suspence of the present Moment to the next, and then from the next to the succeeding, which to the End of Life is to pass away with Pretence to many Things, and the Execution of Nothing.

while Jonathan Swift, in his early “Thoughts on Various Subjects”, produces a witty condemnation of the notion of suspense:³

It is a miserable Thing to live in Suspence;
it is the Life of a Spider. *Vive quidem,*
pende tamen, improba, dixit.

The concept of suspense may be seen to reach its nadir in the Augustan period in England, as in Rome, because it conflicts with every Augustan ideal of reason and good sense. The Augustan humanist, characteristically, claims that life is a very difficult journey, full of fine moral decisions which can only be made if the individual distances himself from a problem and sees it in the clear light of reason.⁴

Dr Johnson’s “The Vanity of Human Wishes” shows that our hopes and desires in this life often come to nothing, and that we should live in the present rather than a hypothetical future:⁵

Where then shall Hope and Fear their Objects find?
Must dull Suspence corrupt the stagnant Mind?
Must helpless Man, in Ignorance sedate,
Roll darkling down the Torrent of his fate?

Suspense, here, is the suspension of all moral choice which, for the Augustans, was an extremely dangerous state, but Dr Johnson was adamant that it could be avoided. He and other writers of an Augustan temperament could see that many contemporary novels relied for their popularity on the suspense felt by the reader, his lack of knowledge of the outcome of the story, and his consequent inability to judge narrative situations in a true, rational light. The closely related effects of suspense and too great an involvement with certain characters were both likely to impair the reader’s ability to discern right from wrong.

In the *Rambler*, No. 4 (Mar 31, 1750), Dr Johnson discusses the moral duty of the modern novelist who engages the sympathy of the impressionable young reader for the adventuring hero:⁶

Many writers for the sake of the following nature, so mingle good and bad qualities in their principal parsonages, that they are both equally conspicuous; and as we accompany them through their adventures with delight, and are led by degrees to interest ourselves in their favour, we lose

3 Jonathan Swift: “Thoughts on Various Subjects”, *A Tale of a Tub: With Other Early Works 1696- 1707*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939) (pp. 241-45), p. 244.

4 Paul Fussell, *The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* (London: O.U.P., 1965) remains the best account of the Augustan mentality.

5 “The Vanity of Human Wishes”, *The Poems of Samuel Johnson*, ed. David Nichol Smith and Edward L. McAdam (Oxford: O.U.P., 1974; 2nd ed.) (pp. 110-133), lines 343-46.

6 *The Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969) III, 23.

the abhorrence of their faults, because they do not hinder our pleasure, or, perhaps, regard them with some kindness for being united with so much merit.

This attitude became a commonplace of critical theory in the latter part of the eighteenth century, and critics often chose Richardson's *Lovelace* as the most worrying example of the reader's suspenseful involvement with a narrative.⁷ At least there is some recognition that suspense could be a pleasurable feeling, albeit one which was more dangerous than valuable in a narrative. James Beattie, for example, praises the Richardsonian epistolary form for its ability to create suspense:⁸

There are some advantages in this form of narrative. It prevents all anticipation of the catastrophe; and keeps the reader in the same suspense, in which the persons themselves are supposed to be ... (p. 567).

But, elsewhere, Beattie equates suspense with a less than pleasurable anxiety,⁹ and, despite the above, he hardly considers suspense an advantage in his overall understanding of the function of modern romance:

Romances are a dangerous recreation. A few, no doubt, of the best may be friendly to good taste and good morals; but far the greater part are unskilfully written, and tend to corrupt the heart, and stimulate the passions. A habit of reading them breeds a dislike to history, and all the substantial parts of knowledge; withdraws the attention from nature, and truth; and fills the mind with extravagant thoughts, and too often with criminal propensities (pp. 573-74).

The same view is suggested by John Moore in an essay called "A View of the Commencement and Progress of Romance", which formed the Preface to a 1797 edition of Smollett's works.¹⁰ Both writers celebrate Cervantes's achievement in showing readers how foolish and credulous they had been in accepting ridiculous tales of chivalry.¹¹ The Gothic novel, attacked by almost all critics of the time, was also criticized because it persuaded the reader to take the fiction itself too *seriously*.

Despite his concern for the moral basis of narrative, the eighteenth-century critic could hardly avoid a recognition that many popular novels and romances of the period were enjoyed *because* they immersed the *reader* in a spatiotemporal situation, so that he knew neither more

7 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1929; 1st publ. 1740, 1742).

8 James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1783).

9 See, e.g. Beattie's discussion of Fielding's narrative technique, p. 573.

10 "A View of the Commencement and Progress of Romance", prefixed to *The Works of Tobias Smollett* (8 vols.) (London: Cadell and Davies, 1797).

11 Beattie, p. 563; Moore, p. lxxx.

nor less than the principal characters and thus felt a large measure of prospective suspense. The popularity of the Gothic novel, in particular, was the empirical evidence of the enjoyability of suspense, but it was contemporary developments in the fields of psychology and aesthetics which provided a potential theoretical basis for an appreciation of the phenomenon.

(iii) The Influence of the Sublime: Later Notions of Suspense

As we have seen, eighteenth-century critical orthodoxy was inclined to be hostile to suspenseful literature, and *suspense* itself, as quite a common word, retained its pejorative associations well into the nineteenth century.

But the importance of the concept of the sublime, especially the terrible sublime, in the eighteenth century, is indicative of an awareness of the possibility that complete knowledge and awareness of an object or situation might not be aesthetically desirable. As a result, an aesthetic developed which insisted on obscurity and personal involvement of an extreme kind.¹

Interest in the sublime, widespread even at the beginning of the century, stemmed from *Peri Hupsuous*, a rhetorical treatise attributed to Longinus, but the Greek, as Monk shows, can hardly be considered as a founder of modern aesthetics because his focus is resolutely on the object itself, the text, and the qualities therein which could elevate the reader with a feeling of greatness and awe.² But the eighteenth century theorists of the sublime gradually redirected their attentions from the object to the observer (or the reader of the sublime text), to discover the qualities of the human mind which allowed it to respond to the external world in this way. Monk sums up this trend:

Sublimity as an aesthetic concept is made entirely subjective; it is not a quality residing in the object, but a state of mind awakened by an object. A century of fumbling aesthetic speculation lies behind this statement. Until it became possible to turn from the object to the subject and to realize that in the aesthetic act the object is “coloured by the imagination,” and until interest centered definitely in the analysis of the subject’s experience - that is until the question, “What effects do so-called sublime objects have on the mind and emotions of the subject?” became more important than the question, “What sublime qualities does the object possess?” — no steady progress in the aesthetic of sublimity was made.

(*The Sublime*, pp 8-9)

It was realised, not only that fear and pain could be agreeable sensations, but that other emotions which depended on a distance in time or space between subject and the object of contemplation might also be pleasurable. John Dennis, for example, in his *The Grounds of*

1 Samuel Monk analyses this side of eighteenth-century thought in considerable detail in *The Sublime: a Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York: MLA of America, 1935).

2 For bibliographical details, see p. 332, n. 38, p. 337, n. 36.

Criticism of Poetry (1704), distinguishes six “enthusiastic passions”: admiration, terror, horror, joy, sadness, and desire.³ Of these, the second and the sixth are closest to suggesting an awareness of the possibilities of suspense.

But the sublime does not fit easily into the measured world of Dr Johnson and the other Augustans, especially the Burkean emphasis on terror as the primary sublime emotion.⁴ It is surprising therefore that the proponents of the sublime met with so little opposition from the moralists of the day. Indeed, many of the Augustan writers retail the theories of the sublime as if they were their own invention.

Parts of Dr Johnson’s *Lives of the English Poets* restate Burke in similar words, while Beattie included an essay on the sublime in his *Dissertations Moral and Critical*.⁵ Like many of his contemporaries, Beattie could hardly fail to notice that the Gothic novel had achieved great popularity because of the horror which it evoked: “It may seem strange, that horror of any kind should give pleasure. But the fact is certain.” (p.615).

Returning to a rhetorical analysis, Beattie shows that narrative pleasure is achieved by what is not said, as well as by what is said. “It may seem strange, and yet it is true, that the sublime is sometimes attained by a total want of expression...” (p.633). Few eighteenth century critics come closer than Beattie to an understanding of the gestalt processes of narrative response:

In sublime description, though the circumstances that are specified by few, yet, if they be well chosen and great, the reader’s fancy will compleat the picture: and often, as already hinted, the image will not be less astonishing, if in its general appearance there be something indefinite (p. 641).

Beattie is talking primarily of descriptive prose, but his theory may be extended to a narrative’s overall presentation of its world:

When an author, in exhibiting what he thinks great, says every thing that can be said, he confounds his readers with the multitude of circumstances; and, instead of rousing their imagination, leaves it in a state of indolence, by giving it nothing to do... (pp. 643-44)

3 John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism of Poetry* (1704), *Eighteenth-Century Critical Essays*, ed. Scott Elledge (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), p. 106.

4 Edmund Burke, “A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful”, *Works* (London: O.U.P., 1906), I, 55-219.

5 Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G.B. Hill (Oxford: O.U.P., 1905) (Life of Cowley), pp. 20-21. James Beattie, “Illustrations on Sublimity”, *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, 605-55.

But critics of the novel did not make the connection between the sublime and the more generalised phenomenon of suspense. Critical interest in the sublime waned in the latter part of the eighteenth century because the application of the theory to other aspects of human experience was imperfectly perceived, and because there was a surfeit of writers who were happy to retail Burke's arguments while adding very little themselves.

Despite Keats's idea of negative capability,⁶ none of the Romantics was truly content with remaining with half-knowledge. As a critical term, the sublime was transformed in a way which reflected the changing emphasis of the new movement. The sublime became an aspect of poetic or imaginative creation, the height of transport that was reached in the creative process. The Romantics, as a movement, emphasized literary creation, rather than consumption, and it was not until much later in the century that it again became possible to think of works of art as rhetorical artefacts rather than the visionary expression which a reader is privileged to eavesdrop.⁷

Nevertheless, many of the narratives of the early part of the nineteenth century, such as those of Scott and Jane Austen, often exercise an extremely careful control over the *reader's* expectations, and stand or fall according to their success in this respect. But a conscious awareness that suspense might be one of the most important aspects of our response to narrative is not to be found in the writings of the period.⁸ The word itself retained all the pejorative associations which it had gathered in the preceding two hundred years. It is to be found quite frequently in Jane Austen's novels but it is always used in a negative sense. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax is mysteriously ill and Emma is summoned to see Mrs Weston for no obvious reason. Mr Weston escorts Emma, evading all her questions, so, when Emma arrives at Randall's, she says to Mrs Weston: "I have been walking all this way in

6 *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. M.B. Forman (London: O.U.P., 1952; 4th ed.), p. 71 (Letter 32, to George and Thomas Keats, Dec. 21st, 1817).

7 A typical statement of this Romantic "expressive" viewpoint is to be found in Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry" (1821), *Shelley's Critical Prose*, ed. Bruce R. McElderry Jr. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), pp. 4-36. Shelley develops the following themes:

A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds ... (p. 11). A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is, as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness ... (p. 30).

8 Occasional exceptions are to be found in comments on the Gothic novel. Most entertainingly, in *Northanger Abbey* (I, vi, 34), Catherine refuses to let Isabella Thorpe tell her what is going to happen in the Gothic novel she is reading and prefers to keep her own uncertain suspicions. *Northanger Abbey* (and *Persuasion*), ed. John Davie (London: O.U.P., 1971).

complete suspense. We both abhor suspense. Do not let mine continue longer.” (III x, 357-58).

Similarly, in *Persuasion*, with the return of Wentworth to Anne’s life, the heroine cannot help wondering if her former love will still find her attractive. The text comments that, on this question, “which perhaps her utmost wisdom might not have prevented, she was soon spared all suspense ...” (p. 279).⁹ This is because she has made the apparent discovery that he no longer finds her attractive. Indeed, the text is exploiting the negative senses of “suspense” for deceptive purposes here. It is clearly implied that it is to Anne’s *advantage* that she should not feel anxious excitement in this respect.

The same pejorative usage of the term may be seen throughout the nineteenth century. When, in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Alec returns to the scene as an itinerant preacher, Tess cannot believe that the voice she accidentally hears is the voice of her old lover:

But more startling to Tess than the doctrine had been the voice, which, impossible as it seemed, was precisely that of Alec d’Urberville. Her face fixed in painful suspense she came round to the front of the barn, and passed before it (xliv, 386)

At the climax of the story, near the top of the great West Hill in Wintoncester, Angel and Liza-Lu stand in “paralyzed suspense” (lix, 507) which is the mental counterpart to Tess’s physical state at this moment. Like Jane Austen, Hardy would not use the word to describe pleasurable anticipation. Examples could be duplicated from Collins, Dickens, George Eliot, and most of the other great Victorian storytellers. When Conrad gave the title, *Suspense*, to his last, unfinished novel, he was referring, not to the pleasurable feelings which the *reader* was expected to experience, but, presumably, to the anxiety felt throughout Europe while Napoleon, imprisoned on Elba, remained a threat to the precarious peace that had been established.¹⁰

Even in the last edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, there are various neutral definitions of suspense, but none that suggest a positive pleasure. At last, in *Webster’s Third International Dictionary of the English Language* (1961), suspense is defined as “pleasant excitement”.¹¹ Nowadays, it is possible to obtain, from many large newsagents, magazines and comics which are sufficiently confident of the pleasurable associations of the word to use it as part of a title which

9 *Persuasion*, I, vii, 279 (see n. 43).

10 *Suspense: a Napoleonic Novel* (London: Dent, 1954).

11 *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (London: G. Bell, 1961).

is intended to attract the average reader, hence the *Suspense Picture Library* and *Tales of Suspense*.¹²

Nobody today would dispute the assertion that many people enjoy reading novels because they enjoy being uncertain about what is going to happen next. It would be difficult indeed to identify most of the causes of this gradual realization. It is likely that the rise of the custom of serialising narrative in the eighteenth century, and its importance in the publication of novels throughout the nineteenth century, may have been an important factor.¹³ When the average reader was faced with a choice between the serialised form of a novel, which forced him to wait in a state of suspense for long periods between each instalment, and the complete text, usually no more expensive and certainly more durable, he often preferred the former.

Apart from the artificial lengthening of the period of suspense, when compared with the time spent reading the resolution (which remains a constant), there were few other advantages to reading the novel in its serialised form to compensate for the loss in durability and the inconvenience of having to purchase each instalment separately.

These factors, amongst others, contributed to the marked decline of the practice of serialisation around the turn of the century, but the changing nature of suspense in the novel may also have precipitated the decline. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it becomes progressively more difficult to predict the ending of a novel, or to be sure that the narrative will end how we want it to end. It is probable that, in the heyday of serialisation, the long-term reader remained happy in his state of perpetual suspense because he could be confident that the ending would not let him down, and that poetic justice would bring all affairs to their rightful conclusion.

The serialised novel usually maintained a suspense structure which rested on a fundamental security, like most long-running television serials today. Once that security was undermined by the occasional narrative which did not end according to generic precedent, the serialised narrative was no longer so attractive. The reader could no longer rely on the narrative world in the way he had once been able. The novel no longer needed the added insecurity which serialisation offered.

12 See, e.g., the *Suspense Picture Library Holiday Special* which was published in 1978, 1979 and 1980 by I.P.C. Magazines of London. Each is 192 pages long, comprising four or five comic strips, set in characteristic situations of war, exploration, crime and intrigue.

13 See R.M. Wiles, *Serial Publication in England Before 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957).

From Conrad and James onwards, the modern novel characteristically presents a narrative world which appears to the reader to be less knowable and tangible than the world outside, and indeed teaches us to question the certitude of our responses to the real world.

As suspense structures became more open, the detective story gained in popularity as an alternative form in which the reader can be certain of neat and absolute closure. But the detective novel is hardly representative of the best of twentieth-century fiction, constituting instead a throwback to the suspense techniques of the best of the Victorian novels. In reading the modern novel, we certainly feel a much greater, and more fundamental, insecurity and, to that extent, we experience a much higher level of suspense, but it is much less often a suspense which is amenable to rhetorical analysis.

The history of Western literature may be considered as a gradual discovery of the possibilities of suspense. From the earliest classical narratives, in which suspense is systematically eliminated because it is assumed that an audience would feel unpleasantly anxious if it did not know the conclusion of a story, there is steady progress to the present century in which even opposing narrative forms reveal a surfeit of suspense of one kind or another. The public's demand for suspenseful engagement may be seen to have increased proportionately in the same period.

Genres may be observed to have flourished and declined according to the level of suspense which they generate. Poetry has gradually given way to prose narrative as the most important and popular literary form, and prose narrative has moved from epic, history, and the repetition of a small corpus of folk-tales towards new (usually fictional) narratives, notably the various types of fictional romance, horror story and hermeneutic mystery.¹⁴

Pastoral and related forms, even in the form of prose narrative, have almost disappeared because they offer an escape into security which is no longer needed. We can observe genres themselves rising and declining much more quickly because familiarity with a generic structure undermines our sense of the danger of reading. Today a significant proportion of published narratives do not conform to previously established generic rules, and those narratives which do

14 My application of the concept of the *hermeneutic* mystery, as an overall term for a type of narrative which relies heavily on generating retrospective suspense, such as the detective story, is derived from Robert Champigny, *What Will have Happened: a Philosophical and Technical Essay on Mystery Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1977), p. 13. Champigny's usage is in turn derived from Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 19. There is a risk that this use of *hermeneutic* will create a confusion with the philosophical study of *hermeneutics*, but there is little connection between the two.

finally conform endeavour to conceal their generic direction for as long as possible.

(iv) Recent Critical Theory: Rabkin's Narrative Suspense

The growing prestige of suspense as an aspect of narrative, and a renewed interest in the reader's role in the production of literary meaning, ought to have resulted in rather more critical interest in the phenomenon of suspense than has in fact materialised. Amongst books, articles, theses, etc., produced in the period 1960-1994, there are very few indeed with *suspense* in the title.

As far as I am aware, only one critical work published in English takes suspense as its avowed topic. Even that one text, Eric S Rabkin's *Narrative Suspense*, published in 1973, is misleadingly titled, since it has little to say about suspense as such.¹

For Rabkin, *suspense* is a synonym for *diachronic structure*, which includes all aspects of a reader's temporal engagement with language or narrative. He successfully shows that our understanding of any given statement, *lexia*, or, in his own terms, *bit*, is dependent upon the context(s) that we hold in our minds at the moment of reading, so all perception of meaning is dependent on diachronic structure.² By employing *suspense* to refer to all aspects of the reader's response, to the production of meaning as well as the inability to perceive meaning, or to apply context to text conclusively, the concept becomes redundant.

There is no discussion of plot suspense because it is presumed to operate on a simple, conscious level, rather than the much more interesting unconscious, or subliminal, level. Rabkin's object is to show how much more "fundamental" to our experience of the text is our subliminal knowledge than our conscious knowledge." (p.13). I doubt whether there is an effective or useful distinction to be made between conscious and unconscious levels of suspense. The questions which are consciously formulated in one reader's mind may not occur to another reader, whose interest is centred elsewhere.

Rabkin distinguishes four levels of narration on which suspense operates, the levels of plot, character, theme, and style.³ This is reasonable in itself, but Rabkin is unwilling to abstract one level from

1 Eric S. Rabkin, *Narrative Suspense* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1973).

2 Rabkin, p. 183; see also p. 328 n. 8.

3 Rabkin, p. 74.

another. Rather than identifying differences between techniques of plot-suspense and theme-suspense, for example, or showing that they might interfere with one another, there is an attempt to demonstrate that suspense tends to operate on all four levels simultaneously in any given work. Rabkin's theoretical distinctions operate primarily on other levels altogether. Diachronic structure is divided according to the following binary distinctions: as either *procontextual* or *anticontextual*, *comparative* or *bisociative*, *discharging* or *residual*. A given text might be anticontextual, bisociative, and residual, for example. This creates eight possible combinations (2x2x2), reducing to six because discharging, comparative structures are deemed to be impossible.

Since only one of these terms (*bisociation*, taken from Koestler)⁴ is likely to be familiar, and since the larger part of Rabkin's text is devoted to a justification of these divisions as useful critical tools, it will be helpful at this point to put them in plainer English. All six terms refer to the relationship in the reader's mind between the perceived *bit*, or narrative unit that has been reached, and the eidetic text, or various contexts, extrinsic or intrinsic, which the reader holds in his mind. A *procontextual* bit, e.g., a metaphor, is a unit which is seen to support or add something to the implied context(s), while an *anticontextual* bit, e.g. irony, takes something away.⁵ If the new bit reflects or modifies one single context only, it is said to be *comparative*, while if it joins together two or more different contexts, it is *bisociative*.⁶ Finally, if the net result of the conjunction of bit and context(s) leaves something to be carried forward in the reader's mind, either inside or outside the reading process, it is said to be *residual*, while, if there is no residue, *discharge* is seen to have occurred.⁷

It seems that the six possible combinations of these categories correspond to traditional narrative genres. Romance, for example, normally involves the reader in procontextual, residual bisociations. A grid is constructed which will serve to "distribute narratives according to the affect of their use of suspense" (p.157):

4 See p. 23 ff, above.

5 Rabkin, pp. 186, 183.

6 Rabkin, pp. 183-84.

7 Rabkin, pp. 186, 184.

	Procontextual	Anticontextual
comparisons (residue)	(I) folk tale ("The Ghost Wife") to (S) epic (<i>The Aeneid</i>) A	(I) picaresque (<i>Lazarillo</i>) to (S) satire (<i>Gulliver's Travels</i>) B
(residue) /	romance (<i>Daphnis & Chloe</i>) C	realistic novel (<i>Germinal</i>) D
bisociations /	(I) melodrama to (S) comedy (<i>Bleak House</i>) E	(I) joke (<i>Tristram Shandy</i>) to (S) tragedy (<i>Death in Venice</i>) F
discharge		

This is the "Actual Generic Grid" reproduced from page 158.⁸ (I) stands for "Individual" and (S) for "Society", so the system is seen to balance on four different axes. I do not find this particularly helpful as a theory of genre. Genres are aesthetic forms which have survived and evolved because of the specific pleasures which they create, combining features which are discovered to be most appropriate to the needs of a target audience. From all the possible combinations of choices of story, conclusion, character, style, tone, typographical layout, length, etc, only a few combinations have established themselves as successful genres. But there are no blank spaces on Rabkin's diagram, and therefore no evaluative distinctions between different possible diachronic structures.

The weakest of Rabkin's binary distinctions is that between comparison (or association) and bisociation. In his glossary, Rabkin states that *comparison* refers "to the relation of a *single* perceived bit to a *single* eidetic bit, or to a *single* context" (p. 184), while bisociation links two or more contexts. But there is a failure to discuss the difficulty of distinguishing *relevant* contexts from *irrelevant* contexts. There is an important sense in which any literary bit relies for its interpretation and effect on a number of contexts, extrinsic and intrinsic to the text under

8 Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* (Baltimore: Penguin Classics, 1968); George Bird Grinnell, *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-Tales* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 129-31; *Two Spanish Picaresque Novels: Lazarillo de Tormes and The Swindler*, trans. Michael Alpert (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1975); Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1941; 1st pub. 1726); Emile Zola, *Germinal*, trans. L.W. Tancock (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1968; 1st pub. 1885); Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1926; 1st pub. 1759-67); Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1955; 1st pub. 1912).

consideration.⁹ It is difficult, for example, to accept the assertion that “*Gulliver’s Travels* clearly belongs within Genre B. Each book sets up a single context” (p.114). One wonders what is the single context of Book Three.¹⁰ Why should all the contexts which Rabkin finds implied by *Daphnis and Chloe*, say, not be relevant to an understanding of *Gulliver’s Travels*, which would seem to most to be far more complex?

All stages of the reading of the individual text are expected to exhibit, on all four levels of narration, the same characteristics of diachronic structure, according to genre. Those texts deemed to discharge at one moment on one level are expected to discharge at every moment on every level. Rabkin attempts to demonstrate (pp. 142-146) that the first resonant paragraph of *Bleak House* leaves little significant residue in the reader’s mind, but the proof is far from convincing. I would prefer to say that all narrative suspense might be classified as a residue from the text, an unanswered question, while the resolution of the suspense structure provides a discharge.

Suspense structures are cycles of uncertainty and resolution, rather than continuous repetitions of one or the other. What is it that is being discharged if there is a “continuous discharge”? If a procontextual unit adds something to the text already read, how can it provide a discharge? Rabkin’s system raises too many such problems to survive a detailed consideration.

Despite the many flaws in his system, Rabkin is more impressive as a speculative theorist than as a practical critic, as his infrequent analyses of actual texts make clear. He attempts an appraisal (pp. 66-68) of the experience of reading Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonelyhearts*, using only a 1962 paperback edition.¹¹ This paperback clearly includes no list of chapter titles at the beginning, and Rabkin asserts that on completing Chapter One there will be a possible ambiguity in the reader’s mind. Has he just finished a short story or started a novel? The chapter may be said to discharge, because the episode is complete in itself, yet it does not have the strong “payoff line” which we associate with short stories. In fact, this ambiguity would probably not have occurred to the original (1933) readers of *Miss Lonelyhearts*.¹²

9 Barthes’s *S/Z*, for example, demonstrates, through painstaking analysis, that every unit of the text functions on more than one level, and he enumerates the various levels of the reader’s understanding.

10 *A Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbdubdrib and Japan*.

11 Nathanael West, *Miss Lonelyhearts* (New York: Greenberg, 1933); *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust* (New York: New Directions Paperback, 1962).

12 It is true, however, that the idea for *Miss Lonelyhearts* as a novel grew out of a series of short stories, the combination of which is not always entirely convincing. Before the book was published in April 1933, versions of five of the chapters had appeared in

The first edition commences with a list of chapter titles (for it is indeed a novel), and the name “Miss Lonelyhearts” in each of the fifteen titles indicates the unity of the narrative to come, although we cannot yet discount the possibility of a number of loosely connected episodes. The comparative absence of plot in the first chapter would have been sufficient confirmation that it is only the start of a long narrative. Rabkin’s discovery of ambiguity can hardly be considered relevant to the experience of the text as it was originally conceived.

Rabkin states that the last chapter of West’s narrative “ends with his [i.e. Miss Lonelyhearts, a male agony columnist] death” (p. 68). But, when seen through the eyes of a mystery reader, there is no firm indication in the text that Miss Lonelyhearts is dead at all. At the end of the book, he is left rolling down the stairs, after being shot in a scuffle with the cripple, Doyle, who suspects him of shooting his wife. West does not even tell us that the bullet has struck Miss Lonelyhearts, yet Rabkin is only summarising the experience of most readers of the text, and perhaps even the role of the implied *reader*.¹³ As readers, even today, we tend to construct the neatest, most conclusive ending possible.

We feel it appropriate, in an ironic way, that Miss Lonelyhearts *should* die at this point, because of numerous specific features in the preceding narrative, notably the consistently ironic contrast between the hero’s aspirations and his achievements. Such end-writing is an important part of the gestalt process of reading. Suspense, in its traditional sense as speculation about future narrative possibilities, relies on our gestalt ability to perceive whole, connected structures from a mass of apparently disconnected details, in reading’s extraordinary paralogistic process of turning words into worlds.

In the following section, we will consider a type of narrative which relies almost entirely for its effect on the *reader’s* ability to project future narrative states and to care whether they come to pass or not. Jane Austen’s *reader*, like her heroines, tends to live in the future, transmuting the chaos of everyday sensation into an ideal cosmos in which she and the hero will live happily ever after.

various periodicals, but these five do not include the opening chapter which was composed specifically to introduce the novel.

13 Rabkin is not the only critic to assume that Miss Lonelyhearts dies at the end of the novel. See Carter A. Daniel, “West’s Revisions of *Miss Lonelyhearts*”, Martin Jay ed., *Nathanael West: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 53.

First Impressions of *Persuasion*

(i) The Austenian Romance and the Detective Story

‘Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken’ (Emma, p. 431)

Why was *First Impressions*, the original title of *Pride and Prejudice*, replaced by its present title? I believe the main reason why the first title was discarded is because it gives too large a clue that there will be second, and radically different, impressions of Darcy, so that we suspect too early that he is the man to marry Elizabeth Bennet.

The centrality of this problem to an understanding of the structure of Jane Austen’s fiction will be the main subject of this chapter.

Jane Austen spent her novel-writing career perfecting a type of narrative which, previously, was in its unsophisticated infancy.¹ So thorough was Jane Austen’s development of its potential that this genre, which we will call the *Austenian romance*, reached its maturity in her own work and has developed relatively little since.² But Austenian romances are still being written, and also read, by a very large, predominantly female audience.³ It is commonly assumed that the basic element of appeal is fairly obvious; boy meets girl, [various obstacles keep them apart but these are overcome] they marry, and live happily ever after.

¹ As this chapter is intended to demonstrate, I believe that Jane Austen’s work is a big step forward, at least in terms of suspense, on her obvious predecessors, Richardson and Fanny Burney. In these writers’ productions, there does not tend to be much mystery about the hero’s qualities or the heroine’s feelings for him.

In *Evelina*, in fact, there is very little for the heroine to do, except demonstrate her sensitivity and await the development of the plot, which is completely mechanical and without intrinsic interest.

The Idea of the Novel in Europe, 1600-1800 (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 223; Frances Burney, *Evelina: Or, the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (London: O.U.P., 1968; 1st pub. 1778).

² It will be clear that the concept of the *Austenian romance* draws more on the twentieth-century than the eighteenth-century notion of *romance*.

³ The most accomplished exponent of the Austenian romance in our own time is probably Georgette Heyer, who adheres very closely to the patterns established by Jane Austen. Amongst publishers, Mills and Boon have been particularly successful in marketing the formula, publishing a large number of very similar Austenian romances every year.

Such a teleological summary, I would suggest, gives a misleading impression of the appeal of the Austenian romance, a first impression which would disappear with a thorough examination of the relatively complex structures of this type of romance.

The Austenian romance is, more than any other genre, the forerunner of the detective novel, and a comparison with that more recent form yields many interesting similarities. The reader of the detective novel is faced with one all-important question — who is the murderer? — although there may be several minor connected mysteries. When the answer to the primary question is revealed to the *reader* a few pages from the end of the text, the rest of the narrative suddenly shifts sharply into focus and the story suddenly “makes sense”. This pleasurable anagnorisis, and the promise of anagnorisis, are cerebral, rather than emotional, pleasures, and, although the anagnorisis may last no more than a few seconds, these pleasures constitute the basic pleasure of the detective story.

It has been suggested already that the writer of the detective story, or the hermeneutic mystery in general,⁴ usually attempts to confine the *reader's* anagnorisis to the briefest possible moment.⁵ This kind of complete surprise would be difficult to achieve in the Austenian romance because, on some level of subconscious expectation, the reader should always anticipate that hero and heroine are meant for each other. Instead, it is advisable that, from a certain period before the declaration of mutual affection, it should become progressively more obvious that this is the destination of the narrative. In *Persuasion*, for example, it becomes gradually easier to be certain that Anne and Wentworth will eventually marry.

But such a certainty would be extremely undesirable through the larger part of our reader of the Austenian romance, just as it would be in a detective story. The Austenian romance asks one apparently simple question — who is the hero? — and when the *reader* knows the answer to this question he will understand the rest of the text, its plot, characters, and themes. A number of potential heroes are established *before* one is identified as the object of the heroine's affections.

But if we decide, as well we might, that Fanny Price, for example, is sure to marry Edmund Bertram, this will seriously affect our enjoyment of the rest of the narrative. We will become frustrated when the text attempts to establish Henry Crawford as a suitable candidate for Fanny's love, just as we would become impatient if we saw the solution to a detective story.

⁴ For a history of the concept of the *hermeneutic mystery*, see p. 339, n. 49.

⁵ See pp. 22-26.

Just as every sentence of the detective story is carefully designed to keep the *reader* from guessing the solution, and yet to ensure that the transformational solution is consistent with all that precedes it, so every line of the successful Austenian romance must keep these twin objectives in mind.

Reading an Austenian romance offers emotional, as well as cerebral, pleasures which are missing from the detective story. It is expected that we will sympathize with the heroine through her trials and tribulations and, without knowing it, fall half in love with the true hero ourselves. If the final declaration is a complete surprise, the *reader* will not have had time to generate the affection for the hero which makes the union so enjoyable. The detective novel, though still more teleological than the Austenian romance, does not offer this conflict of conscious expectations and unconscious desires which is the peculiar appeal of the earlier genre.

For the lovers' final union to be aesthetically satisfying, therefore, several conditions must apply, as follows:

1. The hero is an adequate match for the heroine and attractive to the reader.
2. There is no other hero with comparable claims.
3. The lovers have loved each other, unconsciously at least, for a considerable length of time.
4. The union is in some way unexpected or surprising.
5. The heroine should choose a husband who is not anticipated, or perhaps even desired, by those around her, thus establishing her own freedom and individuality.

A similar list could be compiled to account for the various conflicting forces which must be reconciled at the conclusion of a detective novel.⁶

⁶ A tentative set of rules for the conclusion to a detective story might include the following:

- (a) The villain is an individual who has played a central part in the action.
- (b) We have not suspect that he is guilty because his actions seem plausible within a different causal system.
- (c) A plausible motive for murder has been established.
- (d) The murder was carried out in quite plausible fashion (murderers are usually sane, even according to the most conservative of verisimilitudes), and each component of the murder sequence has been suggested by the preceding text.
- (e) The maximum possible transformation of our understanding of the significance of past events is achieved, towards the ideal that every textual motif should be seen in a different perspective.

Of these five crucial components, the first three might be described as the constituents of retrospective destiny, and the last two as the elements of suspense. The first three categories tend to act in opposition to the fourth, which is as important as the other three in combination. The hero can be idealized, competition eliminated, and the heroine's desires clearly established, but only at the cost of the element of surprise.

Alternatively, the level of suspense and surprise may be increased by making the hero somehow unsuitable or unavailable, the competition more attractive, or by suggesting that the heroine loves someone else. If these tactics are adopted, the final union will not seem retrospectively inevitable, and the reader's pleasure will be diminished by the suspicion that the heroine might have married someone else.⁷

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- (f) That fresh perspective should be introduced in the minimum possible textual space at the end of the narrative.
 - (g) No questions remain unanswered and no unusual occurrences are left unexplained.
 - (h) The detective has solved the mystery without recourse to special means, through logical, deductive methods which could have been employed by the reader.

⁷ For these reasons, the Austenian romance must necessarily move away from the conventional sign system of courtly love, the sighs and the tear-floods, the ritual psycho-physical manifestations of unfulfilled love.

(ii) The Presentation of the Hero

A balance must be struck between the demands of prospective suspense and retrospective destiny, and an attempt to maximise both elements must be made. How can the writer of Austenian romance deflect attention from the true hero and yet gain the reader's interest in him and sympathy for him?

The solution in earlier and more naive versions of the Austenian romance is to establish material obstacles which stand between the union of heroine and potential hero. For instance, the hero is far too rich to consider the poor heroine, or he is engaged to another girl, or parents are determined that such a match will not be made. The reader gains a certain pleasure when these obstacles are removed, but the element of surprise is diminished because material obstacles always *are* overcome.

Disparity of income is not an impediment to the course of true love, an engagement can be broken as easily as it is made, and parents can either change their minds or be ignored. Such obstacles do not suffice in the sophisticated Austenian romances.

The most important obstacles must be seen to lie in the minds of hero and heroine. Either they do not realize that they are in love with each other, or the state of their emotions is not revealed to the *reader*, or they fight against the recognition that they are in love with each other. Yet it must finally seem that they have been in love with each other all along, or steadily falling in love through the larger part of the narrative. In *Persuasion*, for example, Wentworth has come close to marrying Louisa, but at the end we are not allowed to presume that he has ever thought of anyone else except Anne.¹ Altogether this is an ambitious rhetorical enterprise indeed, a project which cannot be forgotten for a moment.

It would be possible for the text to refrain from taking us inside the mind of heroine or hero at any stage, and to present the social interplay from an objective distance. This would make it far more difficult to guess the heroine's true feelings regarding the different potential heroes. But this is not practical in a genre which relies for most of its effect on the *reader's* sympathetic involvement. It is not impossible to sympathise with a character whose thoughts we do not follow, but it is

¹ See Wentworth's letter of proposal to Anne:

Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant (II, xi, 441).

much less automatic. In first-person narratives, such as *Lord Jim*, in which the true protagonist is not the narrator, this is sometimes the case, but it is a comparatively rare and difficult form.²

It is one of the special features of narrative that it can plausibly present a character's innermost thoughts, an advantage which certainly contributed to its growing popularity compared with dramatic forms, which had only the clumsy convention of the soliloquy with which to give us an indication of a character's true thoughts. The risk of a loss of sympathy, which is inherent in a distanced presentation, is rarely taken in the Austenian romance. Sympathy for the heroine is invariably achieved by telling us what she is thinking through the larger part of the narrative, indeed seeing the narrative world through her eyes.

While the heroine of Jane Austen's texts may be uncertain that she loves the hero until the last possible moment, it is less advisable that the hero should be seen to entertain such doubts about the heroine. In all her novels, it is made clear that the hero has been very much in love with the heroine for some considerable time past, and has only been prevented from revealing his feelings by modesty or lack of opportunity. It has often been noted that Jane Austen very rarely enters the mind of her male characters,³ and it is usually suggested that she herself did not feel confident that she understood the male mind.

A more plausible reason is that it would be impossible to present the hero's thoughts without giving too much of a clue that he was devoted to the heroine. Most of the other important male characters are themselves potential heroes (or pseudo heroes), and there must be no basic distinction in presentation between these and the true hero. It would be awkward to present the feelings of all the potential heroes in detail without risking the reader feeling too great a sympathy for the wrong hero.

The safest plan is to keep all the potential heroes at a considerable distance from the narrative centre.⁴ Furthermore, the intimation, at an intermediate stage, that *any* male character loves the heroine is a strong indication to the experienced reader that he will not turn out to be the hero, whose love is only ever revealed in the last few pages. Most of the proposals to Jane Austen's heroines come from men whom we do

² Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (London: Dent, 1974; 1st pub. 1900).

³ This observation is not so true of male characters who have no pretensions to consideration as potential hero. Charles Hayter, for instance, although of only minor significance, is presented as openly as most of the female characters from his first introduction (e.g. I, ix, 294).

⁴ The narrative centre may be defined as the centre of the *reader's* interests, those characters and situations which appear to matter most.

not take seriously as potential heroes. The absence of any indication what male characters are thinking about is a salient feature of all Austenian romances, not simply those which happen to have been written by Jane Austen.

Indeed, every aspect of the hero's presentation is dictated by the teleological imperative, the basic need to achieve a resolution which seems both surprising and inevitable.

The hero should appear comparatively idealized, although not so idealized that it is immediately obvious that he is the most meritorious male character. His qualities should be of an unassertive kind, so that they are clearly seen only in the latter stages of the narrative, and his few defects should be more immediately apparent, so that it seems that he is disqualified from any serious consideration as hero.

He should be of the right age to make a suitable match, without blemish against his name,⁵ and he should reveal a charm and intelligence which registers on a subconscious level. He should be wealthier than the heroine and of higher social standing, but these facts can often be concealed from the *reader*.

The pseudo-hero, on the other hand, should appear to possess all these attributes, but his charm disappears with repetition and his faults eventually become clearly apparent. A well-timed revelation about the pseudo-hero's past conduct can destroy his pretensions, but such revelations should be carefully prepared by the preceding text, otherwise they will seem to be no more than an arbitrary device to justify the heroine's final choice.

In retrospect, many readers would say that Frederick Wentworth, the hero of *Persuasion*, is the most attractive and sympathetic of all Jane Austen's heroes. This increases our pleasure in the final union, but only at the cost of a certain predictability. A further risk is taken in that Anne and Wentworth are not meeting for the first time, but have been in love before, only deterred from marriage by the persuasion of Anne's trusted friend, Lady Russell.

The Austenian heroine rarely falls in love twice,⁶ so the text must fight a concerted rearguard action to convince us that Wentworth is neither available nor suitable to become Anne's husband. We are therefore told that the young love of Anne and Wentworth was more or less inevitable

⁵ Possible blemishes against the name of the real hero can be established and eventually refuted. The suggestion that Darcy has mistreated Wickham fails in this category. See pp. 115-116.

⁶ This is less true of the genre at a later date; the heroines of George Eliot and Hardy, for example, are sometimes allowed to fall in love more than once.

in the circumstances, “for he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love” (I, iv, 247).

The *author* of the early part of the text is very critical of Wentworth, and he seems to fit the stereotype of the dashing rake, rather than the unassuming hero, with many of the typical beau faults:

Captain Wentworth had no fortune. He had been lucky in his profession, but spending freely, what had come freely, had realized nothing. But he was confident that he should soon be rich ... He had always been lucky; he knew he should be so still (I, iv, 248).

For the first time reader, such a description will undoubtedly suggest various potentially ironic narrative possibilities. Wentworth’s luck will probably turn, and his self-confident pride may lead to a fall. It seems unlikely that such a carefree individual will demonstrate the stability of affection which is necessary to become the hero. Wentworth seems set fair to become a second Willoughby, who, incidentally, receives a far more favourable introduction.⁷

After a brief scare that he may be married,⁸ Wentworth returns to Anne’s life while she is staying with her sister at Uppercross. Like Anne, the *reader* is alert to the smallest indication of the merits, defects, and attitudes of her former lover, and most of the early indications are as negative as the text dares. The entire text of *Persuasion* might be summarised as a running argument that Wentworth cannot possibly be the hero of the piece, but the variety of the arguments against Wentworth, and the subtlety of their presentation, can be best seen from an analysis of one passage at the end of Chapter Seven.

At this point, Anne is avoiding personal contact with Wentworth, but she is in a state of suspense regarding Wentworth’s attitude to her after all these years, and she has to rely on Mary’s “spontaneous information”:

“Captain Wentworth is not very gallant by you, Anne, though he was so attentive to me. Henrietta asked him what he thought of you, when they went away; and he said, “You were so altered he should not have known you again.”” (I, vii, 279)

The suggestion is that Wentworth’s lack of gallantry is revealed by his willingness to make uncomplimentary comments about his former fiancée behind her back. The reader is not intended to notice that the evidence is very poor. These are not Wentworth’s words reported directly by the text, but the account of the unreliable Mary, which, in

⁷ *Sense and Sensibility*, I, ix, 35-36.

⁸ *Persuasion*, I, vi, 268.

turn, may be only a version of Henrietta's account of a conversation. Furthermore, this cannot be a direct quotation from Wentworth because of the personal pronouns that are used, but this inaccuracy is obscured by the misleading use of quotation marks.

Mary's general insensitivity towards Anne's feelings is a necessary aspect of her characterisation, since it justifies the lack of speculation about a prospective union of Anne and Wentworth. Rather like the Ugly Sisters in the Cinderella story, Mary has no idea that the girl the Prince is looking for could possibly be her sister.

Wentworth's alleged comment about Anne is repeated three times in different ways as Anne tries to come to terms with its implications. Here is the rest of Chapter Seven:

“So altered that he should not have known her again!”
These were words which could not but dwell with her. Yet
she soon began to rejoice that she had heard them. They
were of sobering tendency; they allayed agitation; they
5 composed, and consequently must make her happier.

Frederick Wentworth had used such words, or something
like them, but without an idea that they would be carried
round to her. He had thought her wretchedly altered, and,
in the first moment of appeal, had spoken as he felt. He
10 had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion.
15 It had been weakness and timidity.

He had been most warmly attached to her, and had never
seen a woman since whom he thought her equal; but, except
from some natural sensation of curiosity, he had no desire
of meeting her again. Her power with him was gone for ever.

20 It was now his object to marry. He was rich, and being turned on shore, fully intended to settle as soon as he could be properly tempted; actually looking round, ready to fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and quick taste could allow. He had a heart for either
25 of the Miss Musgroves, if they could catch it; a heart, in short, for any pleasing young woman who came in his way, excepting Anne Elliot. This was his only secret exception, when he said to his sister, in answer to her suppositions,

30 “Yes, here I am, Sophia, quite ready to make a foolish

match. Any body between fifteen and thirty may have me
for asking. A little beauty, and a few smiles, and a few
compliments to the navy and I am a lost man. Should not
35 this be enough for a sailor, who has had no society among
women to make him nice?"

He said it, she knew, to be contradicted. His bright,
proud eye spoke the happy conviction that he was nice;
and Anne Elliot was not out of his thoughts, when he more
seriously described the woman he should wish to meet with.
40 "A strong mind, with sweetness of manner," made the first
and the last of the description.

"This is the woman I want," said he. "Something a
little inferior I shall of course put up with, but it
must not be much. If I am a fool, I shall be a fool in-
45 deed, for I have thought on the subject more than most
men."

After the repetition of Wentworth's supposedly crucial words, the first paragraph is designed to stress the advantageous aspects of his little speech. We are to think that they have performed the service of relieving Anne from her state of painful "suspense", so that she can return to her normal state of composure. Wentworth is a threat to her peace of mind, but that little hurdle has now been overcome. For the first-time reader, there is an ambiguity about this paragraph's reliability as an indication of Anne's state of mind.

Is her rejoicing a spontaneous reaction, or, as seems more likely on a second reading, the consequence of Anne's feeling that she *ought* to rejoice at such words? This is suggested by the strange shift in the last line from a simple past tense to a projective *must*. But most readers will take these lines at their face value as an authorised description of Anne's developing state of mind; Wentworth's words compose and allay agitation, and *consequently* must make her happier.

The second paragraph (lines 6-15) continues the evasion regarding Wentworth's actual speech ("such words, or something like them"), and hints at a possible defence to an accusation of tactlessness. Since the previous paragraph "takes place" in Anne's mind we will assume at first that this is a continuation of her understanding of the situation.

But the rest of the paragraph gradually forces us to revise that impression. In retrospect, we can see that we have moved quickly through a direct, authorised presentation (6-7) to Wentworth's own thoughts and state of mind. On this occasion, it is in fact comparatively easy to be certain of these changes because of the clear

use of an operator (“he had thought”),⁹ but often these are omitted. The text might have been more ambiguous, e.g. “Anne was wretchedly altered ... Anne could not be forgiven,” in which case we would not be sure that these were Wentworth’s views. But, at this point, it is desirable that we should be sure that these are Wentworth’s opinions.

As has been observed, Jane Austen very rarely penetrates the minds of her male characters because of the dangers to the suspense structure which this involves. The only justification for telling us what Wentworth is thinking at this time is the necessity to dispel our growing suspicions that he is the hero of the novel. So there can be no holding back in his criticisms of Anne. She has deserted him, and shown a feebleness of character “which his own decided confident temper could not endure.” Again the modal auxiliary (“could”) contributes an important retroactive ambiguity to these strong sentiments.

Is this an authorised statement about Wentworth’s long-term state of mind, a permanent inability to endure Anne’s feebleness of character? Or is it a record of his thoughts at a single instant in time, a decision that Anne’s feebleness of character cannot be compatible with his own confident personality? The first-time reader is encouraged to presume the former, and the last three short, sharp sentences of the paragraph (13-15) underline the finality of Wentworth’s opinions.

The second of these three stimulates our theme-suspense by introducing the concept of “over-persuasion”. While the reader may sense that he is moving a step closer to an understanding of the novel’s title and its significance, in fact most such progress is illusory. The term is clearly pejorative, but of whom is a criticism being made? Is it a comment on Anne that she has been too willing to listen to the comments of others, or is it a criticism of Lady Russell and others who have tried so hard to persuade Anne that she should not attach herself to Wentworth? But the last, terse sentence (15) is clear in its rhetorical intention; we are to think that there is no chance that Wentworth will be attracted to Anne because he finds her weak and timid.

In the third paragraph (16-19), the most decisive part is again the last section. Wentworth has not even the desire to meet Anne again; her “power with him was gone for ever.” As it turns out, Wentworth is certainly amenable to being attracted to Anne all over again, so in what sense can this be true? It would indeed be dishonest if we could be sure that this was an authorised description of a state of mind, valid for the duration of the story. But narrative can rarely be pinned down so easily. Instead, we must assume that there is an implied operator: “it seemed to Wentworth that her power with him had gone for ever.”

⁹ See p.331, n. 26.

But the reader cannot reliably infer such an operator from the preceding text. The noun-phrase, “natural sensation of curiosity”, for example, does not seem to refer to Wentworth’s conscious thoughts, but appears to be an authorial description of his subconscious state of mind. Each type of statement has a different level of reliability as a nexal indicator,¹⁰ as assistance to our understanding of its function in the narrative, now and in the future.

In any complex narrative, it is very difficult to distinguish different levels of significance, to separate the authorial comments which describe an individual’s character, or his long-term state of mind, from the description of that individual’s passing thoughts.¹¹

There is a natural turning point in the rhetorical direction after line 19. Wentworth’s feelings towards Anne have been established, so that we feel that his “warm attachment” (not love, we note) of many years ago will not be revived. The rest of the chapter is intended to indicate that Wentworth is likely to marry one of the Musgroves, Louisa and Henrietta, whom he hardly knows at this stage. The *reader* may well infer a hint of possible authorial disapproval of a man who is “actually looking round, ready to fall in love”, so this is a part of the text’s sporadic attempt to show that Wentworth is not worthy to be the hero.

In what sense does he “have a heart” for girls whom he has only just met? Is this another account of the thoughts of the moment? Presumably not, if he has not yet had any time to form an accurate opinion of the Musgroves. But it is stressed that he has no heart for Anne Elliot, a fact which it would have been very difficult for the text to present without going inside Wentworth’s mind.

To stress the likelihood of Wentworth’s falling for one or both of the Musgroves, a little scene is constructed between Wentworth and his sister, Mrs Croft. Wentworth’s speech (30-35) suggests many possible criticisms of his carefree approach to affairs of the heart and his future plans. His sense of priorities may well appear very misguided. Anybody between fifteen and thirty, as long as they have a little beauty, smile and compliment the navy, may have him for the asking. It is clear that even the vacuous Musgroves will be capable of that.

But Wentworth is “nice” in one respect, at least, as his sister discerns. Anne is to be disqualified by his one major condition, “a strong mind, with sweetness of manner”. Anne’s weakness and timidity cannot be

¹⁰ See p. 331, n. 25.

¹¹ cf. Dorrit Cohn’s concept of *stylistic contagion*, an unclear distinction between psycho-narration (authorised text) and narrated monologue (free indirect speech). The distinction between the two depends on the *degree* of stylistic contagion. Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), p. 33.

atoned for by anything that she now does. Apart from seeking a strong mind and sweetness of manner, Wentworth is determined, by his own account, to be a fool indeed. While the first time reader is unlikely to take him for a fool on the evidence so far, there are enough black marks against him in this passage to make it unlikely, at this stage, that he will turn out to be the hero.

(iii) Strategies of Evasion in *Persuasion*

Wentworth's search for a strong mind is the crux of *Persuasion's* campaign to convince us that he is unobtainable.¹ Anne, who had once shown such a lack of firmness, is forced to stand by and watch as Wentworth makes the acquaintance of the Musgroves and gradually discovers a slight preference for Louisa.

When the party of young people goes walking in Chapter 10, Anne is allowed to overhear a conversation between Wentworth and Louisa, who is herself clearly attracted to this dashing sailor.² Wentworth is impressed with the decisiveness of Louisa's opinions, and says:

‘yours is the character of decision and firmness, I see ... My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm’ (I, x, 304).

This refers us back to the longer passage we have considered, creating both plot-suspense and theme-suspense. To what degree should one go one's own way in affairs of the heart, or listen to the words of experience? In terms of the plot, Louisa's firmness, a quality she nurtures after hearing these words, constitutes her main claim to serious consideration, but there are several important reasons why these rhetorical tactics are likely to be ineffective. Most importantly, the reader is not going to be convinced that Louisa has a stronger personality than Anne. Anne's firmness is revealed in the earliest pages of the text by her attitudes to her father's attempts to “retrench”.

The text tries to persuade the *reader* to take Louisa and Henrietta seriously,³ but one doubts whether Jane Austen had much sympathy for their type. It is to their disadvantage that the world takes them seriously as matches for Wentworth,⁴ and the two sisters are not sufficiently individuated.⁵

1 In terms of suspense, it is comparatively unprofitable to waste narrative space in an attempt to convince the reader that the hero is unattainable. No mere man is ever unattainable in the Austenian romance and the experienced reader soon grasps this primary rule of the genre.

2 The reader tends, erroneously, to assume that Louisa is falling in love with Wentworth, although we are, in fact, told very little about Louisa's state of mind.

3 The Crofts, for example, whose judgement we learn to respect, are quite enthusiastic about the prospect of Wentworth marrying either of the Musgrove girls (I, x, 308).

4 See the discussion of the rule of non-prediction, pp. 107-08.

5 See particularly, their combined introduction, I, v, 260-61.

Anne is forced to admit to herself that “Either of them would, in all probability, make him an affectionate, good-humoured wife” (I, ix, 294). In any case, if the reader is sufficiently experienced in the Austenian romance, he will realize that it is of little importance whether Louisa would make Wentworth a good wife or not. If Wentworth marries Louisa it will be because he was not the hero after all. Within the genre, there are few examples of the hero, loved by the heroine, marrying someone else.

The rhetorical strategy is weakened further by the counterproductive effort to argue that Wentworth cannot be the hero because he is capable of being attracted by a girl of the quality of Louisa.

When Anne tells Lady Russell of Wentworth’s attachment to Louisa, we are given an unrepresentative view of the workings of Lady Russell’s mind:

Lady Russell had only to listen composedly, and wish them happy; but internally her heart revelled in angry pleasure, in pleased contempt, that the man who at twenty-three had seemed to understand somewhat of the value of an Anne Elliot, should, eight years afterwards, be charmed by a Louisa Musgrove (II, i, 337).

Thus the text proves that Louisa is, and is not, a suitable match for Wentworth, and the case against Wentworth is seriously weakened. Furthermore, damage is inflicted on the theme-suspense structure, which concludes with the general feeling that Anne was right to submit to Lady Russell’s persuasion.⁶ If Lady Russell is only concerned to justify her own advice, and feels an angry pleasure when it is vindicated, and cares so little for Anne’s true feelings and happiness, then Anne was certainly wrong to take her advice and to risk never meeting Wentworth again, except by the most fortuitous of coincidences. One can but conclude charitably that the above passage would not have survived intact if Jane Austen had lived to further revise *Persuasion* for publication.

Much of the problem, as far as suspense is concerned, lies in the Augustan tradition of prose-writing, of which Jane Austen’s novels undoubtedly constitute a belated part. In Augustan prose, standards of decorum and restraint are so clearly marked out that it was much easier to identify deviations of style than it has been subsequently.⁷ It is the clear-cut stylistic norm which allows the easy identification of an authorial “voice”. Just as extremes of conduct were likely to meet with the disapproval of humanists from Swift to Burke, so extremes of language and style are a sure indication of irony or authorial

6 Anne tells Wentworth: “I was perfectly right in being guided by the friend whom you will love better than you do now.” (II, xi, 450).

7 See p. 337, n. 28.

disapproval. But the pleasures offered by Augustan prose are a long way removed from the pleasures offered by the suspenseful modern novel.

Jane Austen was caught between the two, and one of the many pleasures of reading her novels is the plenitude of ironies of every degree of subtlety. It is not so much that the ironies are “there” that is important, but that it is possible to locate these ironies with reasonable surety even on a first reading. When the author creates a character towards whom she feels a sense of hostility, such as Lady Russell, and perhaps also the Musgrove girls, it is all too easy for the text to reveal that dislike by the occasional misplaced comment.

Yet it is also possible that the Augustan set of values facilitated the birth of the Austenian romance. Many of the humanists’ psychological-moral assumptions are comparable to those attitudes necessitated by certain properties of the genre. Other types of narrative which are labelled “romance”, from medieval times onwards, reveal one common attribute in their desire to break free from limitations on human potential and achievement.

Romance in general, unlike the Augustan tradition, teaches us to trust imagination rather than reason. On the level of choosing a partner in marriage, this opposition corresponds to the distinction between “love at first sight”, and choosing a husband after mature and rational consideration.

But it so happens that love at first sight is not really possible within the confines of the Austenian romance. In every example of the genre, the first impressions of heroine and *reader* tend to be mistaken. Certain genres favour certain themes, and it is almost inevitable that the Austenian romance will suggest the theme of the difficulty of judging by appearances, especially in response to people that we meet. The theme is intrinsic to the genre because hero and pseudo-hero will not finally be what they seem at first, unless the text manipulates a double-bluff, as in the case of Mr Elliot.

(iv) Character Suspense

Because the *reader's* attitudes to certain characters change so quickly, and because much of our pleasure in reading the nineteenth-century novel derives from the rapid transformation of characters, at least in the *reader's* eyes, it is important to distinguish various separate headings inside the general category of *character* suspense.

An individual in a story is described in a certain way, or from a certain viewpoint, and, from the scattered units of the text which pertain to that individual, the *reader* is encouraged to piece together a coherent whole, which we call *character* or *personality*.

This will always be a gestalt process, but sometimes the reader is aware, on some level, that he has not been given sufficient information about a certain individual to be able to assign him a coherent or definite personality, and therefore to predict some of his actions in advance. In such cases, one type of character suspense is felt.

On other occasions, we may feel that we understand a character, but sense that he is going through a personal crisis which must change him in some way, and we feel prospective suspense regarding the nature of that change. In *A Christmas Carol*, for instance, we wonder how the visits of the Ghosts of Jacob Marley, Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come, will affect the relatively stable, known character of Scrooge.¹ Sometimes, pieces of information about an individual conflict, according to the set of rules or verisimilitude which is in operation, and we wait for some clarification of the situation. The more "closed" the character, the more threatening he tends to be.²

If the text does not take us inside an individual's mind, maintaining an external "focalization",³ and the individual's actions do not conform to the patterns with which we are familiar, we will look forward to a clarification of that individual's character and motives. This is often the case in the presentation of the Austenian romance's heroes and pseudo-heroes.

1 *A Christmas Carol in Prose: Being, A Ghost Story of Christmas* in *Christmas Books* (London: O.U.P., 1954). *A Christmas Carol* was 1st pub. in 1843. See, esp., Stave I, p. 8, for the specification of Scrooge's character.

2 According to Champigny, *What Will Have Happened* (see p. 331, n. 26), p. 66, an "open" character is one who carries the viewpoint. In most texts, a character's openness is not a constant but varies according to requirements of suspense and other factors.

3 *External focalization* is a concept derived from Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), pp. 190-91.

A further possibility is that we are unaware there is anything lacking in our understanding of an individual's character until the text suddenly provides us with new information, or a new perspective, which persuades us to see that character in a new way. In such cases, it would not be true to say that the *reader* always experiences suspense as such, regarding that individual, but there is a *character transformation* which creates a pleasurable anagnorisis for the *reader*.⁴

Mrs Smith's revelations about Mr Elliot, and his motives for being in Bath, make possible a straightforward example of character transformation, enabling the *reader* to understand Mr Elliot, and many of his past actions, in a new light.⁵ This is the equivalent of the solution to a plot's mystery structure which we did not know existed, and there is no necessary difference between transformations of this kind on the levels of plot and character. In the above instance, the revelation might be said to affect Mr Elliot alone, but it also gives us an explanation for Mrs Smith's state of poverty. The dividing line between mysteries which relate to one person alone and to complex situations is not of any great importance.

In retrospect, after such transformations, we can see that a suspense structure has operated, and that there were certain questions which we might have asked. But, in such cases, most readers experience only the pleasures of understanding the resolution of the structure. In these examples of transformation, it should be noted that the individual himself is not deemed to have changed, only our perspective on that character.

We can therefore make a distinction between *retrospective* and *prospective character suspense*. When the character is himself seen to have altered in the narrative present, as in the case of Scrooge, we experience a structure of prospective suspense and resolution. When a character transformation is produced by fresh knowledge about the narrative past, or a new perspective, we respond to a retrospective suspense structure.

But there is also a middle type, a transformation of which it is impossible to say whether it is the individual who has changed, or our perspective on him. This is commonly the case when qualities which are latent in an individual's overall personality suddenly assume a much greater importance in a given situation.

When Tess murders Alec, for example, our perspective is, to some degree, transformed, but it is difficult to say whether it is Tess's

4 On the level of character, this is comparable to the generic type I have called "adventure-turned-to-mystery". See below, pp. 191-93.

5 *Persuasion*, II, ix, 412-16.

character, or our perspective, which has changed. But while the seeds of her violence towards Alec lay unnoticed in the earlier narrative, like clues we had not spotted, it would also be fair to say that her character has been moulded and gradually transformed by the experiences which she has been forced to undergo.

Such an ambiguity in the nature of a character transformation occurs because character is not made up of a simple set of building blocks or characteristics. Nor does the reader pause for a moment to try to imagine that individual with all his character traits carefully proportioned. But the notion of character, on which such suspense structures rely, assumes that there is something stable, or relatively stable, which causes that individual to act in a certain way rather than others. That assumption has been occasionally questioned in recent years, but it is necessary to accept this notion of character if we are to enjoy the nineteenth-century novel to the full.

In fact, most readers today are still able to accept a notion of stable character. In reading, as in our response to people in our everyday lives, our notions of character can only ever be provisional, socially accepted ways of interpreting behaviour. We can only interpret new characters in terms of the possibilities we have already learnt. When we read, we note the consonance or dissonance of the linguistic categories or motifs which are employed in the presentation of a given individual, and our judgement of that consonance is largely determined by our reading of other narratives in which other sets of data are deemed consistent. Gradually, we acquire a set of "characters" and are thus equipped, when reading a new narrative, to glimpse the beginnings of these patterns again. This enables us to predict certain aspects of subsequent conduct or presentation.

When we find this too easy, and the individual does not surprise us by his subsequent actions, we may consider him to be a *caricature*. The greater the predictability, of course, the less the reader's suspenseful involvement. If the presentation is a mixture of old patterns that we have already learnt and other types of behaviour which we have not learnt to bracket so easily, it is probable that we will consider that individual a *character* rather than a caricature. The character's behaviour is far less predictable, and, consequently, interests us more. In order to create a character therefore, it is necessary to deviate by a certain degree from accepted norms, those patterns of behaviour which, at the present moment, are easily identifiable as certain character types.

Verisimilitude is a matter of moderate deviation, for, if the deviation is too great, and the motifs attributed to one individual too incongruous according to contemporary notions of character possibility, today's

lexicon,⁶ it is probable that we will not accept the combination as a valid possibility, and we will claim that such an individual could not exist in the real world. In time, once readers have absorbed that presentation, learnt to imitate it, and to understand character in that way, such an individual may well seem commonplace, even a caricature.

Dickens's texts are full of transformations of one kind or another,⁷ and transformation in general heralds the dissolution of notions of stable character that we have witnessed in the twentieth century. Some would say that this has serious consequences for the novel, the medium most suited to the projection of traditional notions of stable character. Lanham, for instance, argues that:⁸

if literature is really to recover the high seriousness of religion, then it must put the same intense ethical stress on the individual moral being ... on soul, on character ... which religion has traditionally placed on it. Character must be a fixed entity. Final, homogeneous, responsible, it is the building block of an ethics of temptation (*The Motives of Eloquence*, p.66)

Certainly, its stress on character does much to explain the lasting popularity and importance for us of the nineteenth-century novel.

But character transformation in the Austenian romance, as in the detective novel, does not reflect the waning of the idea of character, because transformation is the result only of a change of perspective. Those who are transformed by a retroactive revelation may be relatively simple themselves, such as Mr Elliot, drawn, as he is, from the most basic of repertoires. But it is less likely that we will respond to them as caricatures, even after the transformation, because of the radically different perspective which we had previously adopted.

6 *Lexicon* is a convenient term for a hypothetical dictionary of structural possibilities, in this case the structures of verisimilitude.

7 See Chapter Six for a discussion of Dickens's transformational narrative technique esp. pp. 206-07.

8 Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976).

(v) The Post-Augustan Withdrawal of the Author

It is probably true that Jane Austen was personally an advocate of choosing a husband on the grounds of rational consideration rather than infatuation, although we should not assume that this is true simply because it is an inevitable part of Austenian romance structure.

It is fortunate, perhaps, that Augustan culture survived until the beginning of the nineteenth century because it would have been less easy to discover that structure in an age which insisted on the primacy of the first feelings of the heart. A few weeks before *Persuasion* was published, John Keats wrote to his friend, Benjamin Bailey:¹

O I wish I was as certain of the end of all your troubles as that of your momentary start about the authenticity of the Imagination. I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination ... What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth ... whether it existed before or not ... for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty (*The Letters of John Keats*, Nov. 22, 1817).

Keats's words come closer to expressing the mood of a new age, an age which, without Jane Austen's contribution, might never have discovered the possibilities for entertainment which may be generated by the Austenian romance. Marianne Dashwood, like the lover of an Elizabethan sonnet, relies on her spontaneous reaction to Willoughby, but with disastrous consequences, while Elizabeth almost makes the same mistake in her reactions to Wickham and Darcy. Her sister, Lydia, is one of several warnings in Jane Austen's novels of the folly of a reliance on what the imagination seizes as beauty. In this respect, at least, the Austenian romance is a long way from Romanticism.

Jane Austen may not have been much regarded in her own time, but she is an important influence on the finest of the Victorian novelists,² notably Dickens and George Eliot, who each employed the Austenian romance as a superstructure for their own generic experimentation. Of the generic combination which makes up the typical Victorian "machine

1 For bibliographical details, see p. 338, n. 41.

2 The influence of Jane Austen on her novelistic successors has never been adequately investigated or appreciated. Indications of her influence on George Eliot may be found in Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1968), p. 225 et al. G.H. Lewes did much to foster an appreciation of Jane Austen among his contemporaries.

plot”,³ the Austenian romance is the most mechanical and tightly-bound element. Despite the light touch of her texts, Jane Austen may be seen as the true founder of the machine plot.

The successful Austenian romance demanded a certain withdrawal of the *author* and dislocation of the authorial voice, and the popularity of this genre did much to precipitate that complex of phenomena, later in the nineteenth century, which we have called de-authorisation.⁴ Jane Austen was forced to relinquish her ironic stance through much of her writing, and the uncertainty which that stance can produce, because of the basic conflict between the pleasures of irony and the pleasures of suspense.

Irony, when properly understood, produces the pleasures of knowledge and superior comprehension of a situation. Dramatic irony, for example, characteristically places the *reader's* knowledge against a character's self-ignorance or situational misconceptions. Jane Austen is indeed adept at the stylistic devices (e.g., litotes, antiphrasis, and syntactical anti-climax) which convey irony and place the *reader* above the text.

The opening pages of *Persuasion* provide a number of ironies of this type in the description of Sir Walter Elliot, but such entertaining irony has the additional effect that Sir Walter does not seem to *matter* in the same way that Anne and Wentworth matter. We are placed above him from the beginning and thus do not respond to him on a very straightforward level of sympathy and respect. We feel very little suspense regarding Sir Walter, and it hardly matters that his financial quandary is forgotten by the text after the first few pages.

The opening section of each of Jane Austen's texts are full of easily comprehensible ironies, direct authorial analyses of characters and motives, and the revelation of characters' thoughts as soon as they appear.⁵ Such introductory sections move gradually from a secure world, controlled by a powerful authorial voice, to a situation of suspenseful insecurity, a progression which mirrors the heroine's own movement. Many of the *open* characters of the preliminary sections are not so open on later appearances.

3 The machine has long been a popular metaphor to describe the form of the Victorian novel. Its suitability is discussed by Herbert L. Sussmann, *Victorians and the Machine: the Literary Response to Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968).

4 p. 13 and elsewhere.

5 The opening section of *Pride and Prejudice* employs the quickest transitions from one mind to another, revealing the thoughts of characters who, later, will be closed to the reader.

A text like *Persuasion* can only afford a limited number of characters who will be “placed” ironically by the author. This group of characters must not include any of those who are involved in the basic suspense structure, notably the hero and pseudo-heroes. Thus certain types of irony are a luxury in the Austenian romance. If we take Booth’s basic distinction between *stable* and *unstable* ironies,⁶ it will be seen that Jane Austen works primarily with stable ironies. On a second reading of *Emma*, to take the most celebrated example, there will be few ironies which are not immediately comprehensible. Yet these ironies are sufficiently understated to elude the understanding of the majority of first-time readers of *Emma*.

Stable irony can contribute usefully to the creation of a sense of prospective destiny, but this is inappropriate in a text whose actual ending fulfils the *reader’s* desire, because there is no conflict between the *reader’s* desires and his expectations. Destiny is not inherent in any given plot or sequence of fictional events. Every novelist makes a pragmatic choice regarding the degree of inevitability he wishes the *reader* to feel about the continuation of the narrative at an intermediate stage.

A sense of prospective destiny may be increased, if necessary, by strengthening casual sequences or making plain their impending significance,⁷ or, on a simpler level, by introducing prophetic characters, such as witches, soothsayers, and fortune tellers. Such characters create a strong sense of prospective destiny because, in fiction at least, they are almost invariably right in their predictions, and the reader will suspect subconsciously that they will be right again.

There are no soothsayers in Jane Austen’s fiction. Indeed, one common function of the minor characters in Austenian romance, as in the detective novel, is to predict a wrong continuation of events.

Anne Elliot is expected to marry, successively, Captain Benwick and Mr Elliott, but Wentworth is not suspected even by Anne’s sister, who must have known of the circumstances of their former engagement. For the shrewd reader, the very absence of predictions may be a strong clue that two characters will marry. *Sense and Sensibility* is the only exception to the rule of non-prediction. In the first chapters of this imperfect first essay in the genre, there are strong indications that

6 Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 3-9, 240-45.

7 A text will often conceal the fact that a particular episode is not well integrated into the overall structure of the plot, by insisting, in advance, on its impending significance. See pp. 259-61.

Elinor will marry Edward Ferrars and that Marianne will marry Colonel Brandon.⁸

It is possible that this is intended as a double-bluff since these expectations are not repeated at later stages in the narrative.⁹ The problems with the double-bluff are that it assumes an audience which is uniformly capable of seeing through the single bluff, and that it tends to focus the reader's attention on the character who is offered as the prospective solution. We observe Edward and Colonel Brandon carefully and fail to notice any features which disqualify them from serious consideration as potential heroes.

Finally, when the choice is neither surprising, as it has been predicted at an early stage, nor does it constitute an assertion of the heroine's individuality and freedom, the conclusion will appear comparatively unsuitable and unsatisfactory. We can see that it is advisable that the principle of non-prediction should be observed.

8 Mrs Dashwood anticipates Elinor's marriage to Edward (I, iii, 12, 13), while Mrs Jennings is quick to spot an attachment between Col. Brandon and Marianne (I, viii, 30).

9 Many analogies for these tactics can be found in the detective novel and other types of mystery story. In Agatha Christie's *The Murder at the Vicarage* (London: Collins, 1930), the true murderer, Lawrence Redding, is the one who is suspected from the beginning, and who even confesses to the crime (p. 53).

(vi) Potential Irony as Suspense

The rule of non-prediction is one part of Jane Austen's major "anti-ironical" defence against the predictability of her basic structure.

Straightforward, stable irony is employed only in aspects of the narrative which do not affect the outcome. Her ironic picture of a money-oriented genteel society is clearly separated from the rest of the narrative. Hero and pseudo-hero are not ironically distinguished, except with hindsight, and each has impeccable, if opaque, manners,¹ intelligence, powers of judgement and discernment, as well as romantic attractiveness.

For instance, most first-time readers will find Wickham's conduct towards Elizabeth Bennet irreproachable. Wickham tells an entirely convincing story of how Darcy has frustrated his chances of entering the church, by depriving him of money which is rightfully his.

Elizabeth remarks that Darcy "deserves to be publicly disgraced" (I, xvi, 71). But Wickham is clearly a man of quieter feelings: "Till I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose *him*," he replies. On a second reading of the text, we can easily perceive that the hypocritical Wickham is not holding back in his criticism, but is slandering Darcy in every way possible. At most, a first-time reader might guess that there is a *potential irony* in Wickham's professions. Indeed, he would be wrong to presume any more than that because there is no evidence against Wickham at this stage.²

A concept of potential irony proves more useful to our understanding of suspense than Booth's concept of stable irony. A potential irony occurs in a statement whose ironic content cannot be accurately determined by the first-time reader, but which the reader presumes will be clarified in due course. Indeterminacy is created either by the lack of a sufficient context for judgement or the doubtfulness of the apparent stylistic deviation. Sometimes such uncertainty may last no more than a few lines before the reader finds his bearings.

The first page of *Mansfield Park*, for example, is a factual summary of the fortunes of the three Ward sisters, and Jane Austen remarks

1 See the descriptions of Mr Elliott after Anne arrives at Bath, II, iii, 353, II, iv, 356-57.

2 Yet on subsequent readings, it is easy for critics to forget that they have ever taken Wickham seriously; e.g. Juliet McMaster, *Jane Austen on Love* (Victoria, British Columbia: Univ. of Victoria Press, 1978), p. 69.

blandly that “Mr and Mrs Norris began their career of conjugal felicity with very little less than a thousand a year.” For the first-time reader, this could be an unironic statement of fact, or the use of the cliché (“conjugal felicity”) might suggest a modicum of irony in oversimplification, or, as turns out to be the case, the statement might be a straightforward irony. We know that the irony will soon be clarified, that the gap between the reader and the authorial voice will soon disappear in this respect.

Some of Jane Austen’s most celebrated ironies turn out, on re-examination, to be no more than potential ironies, and therefore an aspect of the suspense structure, in the original dynamic process of comprehension. Isabella Thorpe’s comments on her engagement in *Northanger Abbey* suggest a potential irony: “Had I the command of millions, were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice” (I, xv, 107). We may suspect that she and James are not very well matched, but we do not *know* at this stage how her future conduct will reflect on this comment. Similarly, the perceptive reader may suspect that future events will not bear out Marianne Dashwood’s notable observation:

“At my time of life opinions are tolerably fixed. It is not likely that I should now see or hear anything to change them.” (I, xvii, 80).

Again, potential irony functions as suspense, whetting our appetites for anticipated complications in the plot. In retrospect, these are stable ironies, but they do not necessarily register as such on a first reading.

We tend to forget, after a first reading, how many potential ironies do *not* turn out to be ironic. Potential ironies are clues, tentative indications planted like seeds in the text, some of which will bear fruit and yield, eventually, the authorised structure, and some, perhaps more importantly, which are non-productive, leading to barren hypotheses about the continuation of the narrative. In the aftermath of Wickham’s allegations against Darcy, Elizabeth tries to test his veracity. Miss Bingley, whom we have been persuaded to dislike, says that “George Wickham has treated Mr Darcy, in a most infamous manner” (I, xviii, 85). Elizabeth disagrees, and Miss Bingley turns away “with a sneer”.

Clearly, we are being made to suspect that she is concealing the truth. When Darcy later proposes for the first time, we, like Elizabeth, are expected to read all kinds of ironies and faults into Darcy’s speeches and manner of making them, whereas, on a second reading, we can see that the text is subtly vindicating its hero at every point.³

3 *Pride and Prejudice*, II, xi, 168-72; see, particularly the hint of nobility in Darcy’s final speech.

The true function of the unproductive clue is that it encourages a false projection in the *reader's* mind, but such apparent ironies must be justified within the narrative itself.⁴ *Sense and Sensibility* is particularly rich in artificial complexities, confusion created where there is no narrative secret to conceal. The text emphasizes that we are not being told what Willoughby actually says to Marianne before he leaves for London, abandoning her in a highly emotional state.

We presume that Marianne is hiding something from her family, and our sense of anticipation is increased.⁵ But it turns out that Willoughby has said nothing that would cause such a reaction in Marianne; he has neither engaged nor disengaged himself, something of an anticlimax when it is finally revealed.

Similarly, when Lucy Steele announces in private that she has been engaged to Edward Ferrars for four years, we are encouraged to suspect that there is some kind of deception.⁶ Lucy seems to have all the proofs of her engagement, but the very fact that the text goes to such lengths to prove it, especially with its positioning at the end of Volume One, encourages us to suspect that there is more to this revelation than there seems. Eventually, we discover that this is not so. On a second reading of the text, when we do not entertain any such hypotheses, such passages will appear comparatively redundant, but this at least demonstrates the degree to which Jane Austen's priorities lay in entertaining her first-time readers.

The last two texts to be completed, *Emma* and *Persuasion*, are the most sophisticated in terms of the false structuration that they encourage, but neither is without its flaws. *Emma* has a significant advantage over *Persuasion* in that it portrays a heroine whose judgement and self-awareness are deemed to be far less mature than that granted to Anne Elliot. Anne is in many ways too clever to be the heroine of an Austenian romance, and her judgements are often too close to the *author's* own.

4 Stylistic inconsistencies must be justified by an overall authorial position which is consistent, just as, within the plot structure, particular events which persuade the *reader* to make incorrect projections of the narrative future, or false assumptions about the narrative present or past, must be justified by the discovery of a plausible causal sequence in which they form a part. This can most easily be seen from failures to observe the rule, as in *Our Mutual Friend* (see pp. 208-10).

5 After Willoughby takes his leave (I, xv, 68), we can see the drastic effects on Marianne's peace of mind (I, xv, 71).

6 Lucy makes a great show of producing a picture of Edward and letters from him (which we are not allowed to read), and the evidence of the engagement ring that Edward wears is stressed. But Elinor, like the *reader*, is sceptical about this elaborate show of proofs. This seems to be a good example of a *ceratin* (see pp. 203-04). We wonder why the text takes so much trouble to convince us that there is an engagement unless there is some mistake.

Anne is a keen observer of Wentworth's conduct, and she concludes with a full sixty-two pages to go that "all, all declared that he had a heart returning to her at least ... He must love her" (II, viii, 393). From this point, the absence of significant narrative problems to be solved means that boredom may ensue, and the resolution of *Persuasion* is a far greater proportion of the completed text than is normally advisable in the Austenian romance.

Much of Jane Austen's careful preparation, in the portrayal of Mr Elliot as potential hero,⁷ is put at risk by Anne's premature scepticism about his re-emergence as a paragon of virtue:

Still, however, she had the sensation of there being something more than immediately appeared, in Mr Elliot's wishing, after an interval of so many years, to be well received by them. In a worldly view, he had nothing to gain by being on terms with Sir Walter, nothing to risk by a state of variance (II, iii, 350).

But Anne's is never a worldly view and, consequently, nor is ours. Up to this point Mr Elliot is presented in just the right way to guarantee our suspicion that he will turn out to be the hero of the piece. He is slandered by those characters whose views we do not respect and, since we see no concrete evidence of his misdemeanours, we are sure to suspect that the opposite is true. Until this late stage of the text, despite Wentworth's mixed progress, we will retain this suspicion. Anne is too shrewd a judge of Mr Elliot's conduct to be fooled by him for more than a moment.

Mr Elliot is not the only pseudo-hero of *Persuasion*. Captain Benwick is clearly attracted to Anne, and there is little to prevent him from being seriously considered by the *reader* as potential hero. No revelations damn Benwick in retrospect, so it is necessary that he should be granted happiness elsewhere by his own choice.⁸ This is the best that Benwick could hope for because the majority of Jane Austen's pseudo-heroes are eventually blackened as much as possible. Pseudo-heroes are important, not only as red herrings, but as confirmations of the heroine's, and therefore the reader's, power. The heroine, neither rich nor necessarily beautiful, travels through the text making conquests of all those who are clever, rich, and socially desirable. Elizabeth Bennet, in particular, is quite ruthless in her attempts to make every man fall in love with her.⁹

7 See p. 343, n. 46.

8 But very little space is devoted to the important task of justifying the union of the two very different personalities of Captain Benwick and Louisa. Many readers will feel that Louisa is not worthy or suitable to become Benwick's wife.

9 Elizabeth has three men simultaneously falling in love with her, despite her lack of any fortune, and she does little to discourage any of them. She has met Wickham once

Finally, however, only one man is good enough to have his love returned. Like Mr Elliot, the true hero makes a general progress from disapproval to approval in the course of the text. His character may be said to improve in the narrative present, or his qualities may be seen in a different perspective, or, more likely, there will be a combination of both types of transformation. Pseudo-heroes do not tend to make a correspondingly gradual move in the other direction because their 'good' character is almost invariably based on a misconception of heroine and *reader*, and thus can be destroyed in an instant, thus providing an anagnorisis in which the reader's subconscious judgement is vindicated.

The pseudo-hero has only to be revealed for what he is, through the discovery of some past misdeed. Alternatively, he can commit some crime in the narrative present (e.g. Henry Crawford), which destroys his standing in the *reader's* eyes. But, if this is to be sufficiently plausible, it must be justified by a number of indications in the preceding text that he is capable of such an action, and such indications will undermine any suspicions that we have that he will be the hero.

The revelation of past misdeeds is more common, so the experienced reader will be especially attentive to indications of a murky past, when considering a potential hero. Thus it is normal to establish potential misdemeanours in the real hero's past life. This appears to be the sole function in the text for the curious invention of a brother for the Musgrove girls, who had died while serving under Wentworth. We are encouraged to suspect that there may be more to his death, from undivulged causes, than meets the eye. Mrs Musgrove echoes her daughters in her warm praises of her deceased son:

There was a momentary expression in Captain Wentworth's face at this speech, a certain glance of his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth, which convinced Anne, that instead of sharing in Mrs Musgrove's kind wishes, as to her son, he had probably been at some pains to get rid of him... (I, viii, 285)

If Wentworth did not turn out to be the hero, it is probable that this small indication would have been retroactively exploited. On the level of plot, this is the equivalent of the potential irony, which may be considered as a red herring on the level of style.

only, but already she is planning the conquest of this young man when she arrives at a ball:

She had dressed with more than usual care, and prepared in the highest spirits for the conquest of all that remained unsubdued of his heart, trusting that it was not more than might be won in the course of the evening (I, xviii, 79).

Of course she has no intention of falling in love with him herself.

The Austenian romance is a power-game which results in absolute, unequivocal victory for the *reader* and heroine, both of whose hopes are confirmed by the ending. Such games are perhaps a microcosm of life itself, and man's struggle to contain the "otherness" of experience within his own imaginative empire. But in life the victory is not certain, so we return to romances in search of a pleasure akin to negative capability,¹⁰ a state of mysteries and doubts but, the result assured, no irritable reaching after closure, a sublime which rests its appeal on a subconscious security.

¹⁰ See p. 338, n. 41.

George Eliot and the Price of Suspense

(i) The Later Austenian Romance

When Richardson published *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded*, the second half of the chosen title suggests that he was little concerned with the predictability of his narrative structure.

The reader will not find it difficult to guess at an early stage in what way Pamela's virtue will be rewarded.¹ The heroine of Fanny Burney's *Evelina* likewise, appreciates the merits of Lord Orville, whom she eventually marries, on their first meeting at the beginning of the text.²

In a sense, these works are the direct predecessors of Jane Austen's romances, but she was writing for an audience which was beginning to demand a larger measure of suspense and unpredictability in their reading. As a readership becomes familiar with certain genres, greater deviation from generic norms is necessary in order to retain interest. Thus, another fifty years on, if one chose to write Austenian romances, the problem was compounded by the potential readership's greater experience of the genre.

The genre not only survived its own familiarity, but became the organising superstructure of many of the texts written by George Eliot, Dickens and others. It had become more difficult to provide a conclusion which was both satisfying and surprising, but this disadvantage was offset by the expectations of the Victorian audience, insofar as it was no longer felt that a novel should come to such a

1 The original title page would have eliminated a large measure of prospective suspense. *PAMELA: or, Virtue Rewarded*. In a series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel to her Parents: Afterwards, in her exalted Condition, between Her, and Persons of Figure and Quality, upon the Most Important and Entertaining Subjects, in Genteel Life. IN FOUR VOLUMES. Publish'd in order to cultivate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of Young of both Sexes.

Details taken from Blackwell's (Oxford, 1929) edition.

2 See pp. 340-41, n.2.

pronounced full-stop with all sympathetic characters living happily ever after in perpetual stasis. Thus it was possible to plot the union of characters who were far less obviously meant for each other than they are in Jane Austen's texts. Even in retrospect, Ladislav is not obviously right for Dorothea, Estella for Pip, or Eugene for Lizzie Hexam.³

New variations were found to revitalise the Austenian romance, just as fresh twists must be discovered to keep the detective novel alive, and it is rare that the Victorians' Austenian romances are instantly reminiscent of Jane Austen herself. The Victorians, aiming at an audience with a wide variety of interests, could not be content with a single genre. Most mixed old genres — tragedy, adventure, Austenian romance, comedy, pastoral, gothic horror — with relatively undeveloped forms like the hermeneutic mystery. Perhaps because of their wider interests, none wrote Austenian romances which are as thoughtful and carefully-planned as those of Jane Austen herself.

None managed to maximise prospective suspense and retrospective destiny as successfully as Jane Austen, often because of a lack of care in the presentation of pseudo-heroes and pseudo-heroines. In *Little Dorrit*, for example, none of the rivals for Arthur's affections ever begins to compare with Amy Dorrit herself, and there is relatively little uncertainty about the outcome of the text.⁴

The Austenian romance, which traditionally ends in marriage, inevitably contributes to the maintenance of the institution of marriage within contemporary society. George Eliot herself was a little disturbed by society's attitude to her decision to live with G H Lewes without marrying him.⁵ Yet she was content to publish texts which, amongst other things, are Austenian romances of a comparatively traditional kind, with endings which are "strong" even by contemporary standards.

There are to be no doubts that the married couple will live happily ever after. Fred Vincy and Mary Garth, the *author* of *Middlemarch* observes, "achieved a solid mutual happiness" (Finale, p. 890). Marriage, it is suggested, should not be thought of as the end of the story:

3 George Eliot, *Middlemarch, a Study of Provincial Life* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965; 1st pub. 1871-2); Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: O.U.P. 1953; 1st pub. 1862), *Our Mutual Friend* (London: O.U.P., 1952; 1st pub. 1865).

4 *Little Dorrit* (London: O.U.P., 1953; 1st pub. 1857).

5 See Lawrence and Elizabeth Hanson, *Marian Evans and George Eliot: a Biography* (London: O.U.P., 1952), p. 176.

It is still the beginning of the home epic - the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common (p. 890).

But it is certainly the end of the text. The Vincys' post-marital life can be summed up in one line, while their courtship has taken the rest of the book to describe. Similar promises of perpetual happiness are made at the marital conclusions of each of her other texts.⁶

In each case, George Eliot exploits a number of devices in order to maintain prospective suspense and to obscure an outcome in which there is a union of the most sympathetic and virtuous characters. In *Adam Bede*, Adam and Dinah are clearly the most deserving characters, but Adam is in love with pretty Hetty Sorrel, who may one day become worthy of his love, while Dinah is attached to Adam's brother, Seth. If Seth had been less sympathetic than he is, it would have been easier to anticipate his eventual disappointment, but the fact that Adam must take the place of his own brother should prevent us from anticipating the ending too early.

George Eliot has one advantage over Jane Austen in that it is now deemed possible that the hero and heroine should be able to love more than one person, without compromising their integrity or ability to settle down to a happy and life-long marriage. Unlike Wentworth, Adam is not forced to realise that he never loved anyone except Dinah.

The conclusion of *Felix Holt, the Radical* is easier to predict from an earlier stage and this mars the overall achievement of the novel. Predictability results from the lack of plausible heroines besides Esther or serious candidates besides Felix for her love. But, in formal terms at least, the text may be considered as an Austenian romance, if not a successful one, because the surface logic of the text insists on the unlikelihood of Felix and Esther marrying, with the establishment of various alternative possibilities. When Felix and Esther meet, neither is impressed by the other; he finds her empty-headed and frivolous, while she thinks that he ought not to be content with his lowly station in life. Later, when he finds her a little more attractive, he maintains that a man in his position should never marry.⁷

Meanwhile, Harold Transome, himself a relatively sympathetic character, wishes to marry Esther, and she does not find his courtship

6 The same is true for Dorothea and Ladislav (*Middlemarch*, Finale, p. 894). See also *Felix Holt, the Radical* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1972; 1st pub. 1866), Epilogue, p. 606, and *Daniel Deronda* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967; 1st pub. 1876), lxx, 880.

7 *Felix Holt*, x, 212.

displeasing. Indeed, Harold willingly relinquishes the fortune which is rightfully hers, and asks if she will marry him as well. She eventually decides to refuse both offers, and thus becomes a more suitable candidate to marry Holt, an event which is achieved with little delay. Although we follow the thoughts of Esther and Felix throughout much of the text, there is no overt indication that they feel they love each other. But the subliminal logic of the text is such that most readers will expect the ending which actually occurs.

The early, if limited, sympathy which is won for Harold Transome is the major hindrance to our anticipation of the ending, and it is this device which forms the essence of the deceptive strategy in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. In these two texts, the most sympathetic and interesting characters (Lydgate and Dorothea, Deronda and Gwendolen) do not marry at the end of the narrative and, consequently, the marriages which do occur retain a large element of surprise. The false expectations excited by *Middlemarch* may be a happy accident of the circumstances of composition,⁸ but those generated by *Daniel Deronda* must be considered as an integral part of the anticipated reading experience. In each case, the text need not go to great lengths to develop the red herring, because our generic experience that the most important and sympathetic male and female characters usually marry each other is enough to persuade us that that ending will occur once more.

In the case of the earlier text, George Eliot was presumably aware that the first-time reader would anticipate that the two most important elements in the text would eventually collide, as they do in the typical Dickensian text.

Almost as soon as Lydgate is introduced, the text indicates that *at the moment* Lydgate is more attracted to Rosamond than Dorothea:

Certainly nothing at present could seem much less important to Lydgate than the turn of Miss Brooke's mind, or to Miss Brooke than the qualities of the woman who had attracted this young surgeon. But any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand (xi, 122).

This passage is full of apparent significance. Proleptic glimpses are, by definition, more important as indications of future developments than

8 The best account of the amalgamation of the two parts of *Middlemarch* is that of Jerome Beaty, *Middlemarch: From Notebook to Novel: a Study of George Eliot's Creative Method* (Urbana, Illinois: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1960).

any other type of narrative.⁹ The unobtrusive [prominent] “at present” functions as a straightforward signal that we are to expect the opposite of the present state of affairs in due course. Most Victorian novels, including those of George Eliot, may be said to illustrate the stealthy convergence of human lots, but the affairs of Dorothea and Lydgate never truly converge.

The tone and sentiment of the last two sentences is most certainly calculated to upset the expectations generated by the first ten chapters that this is going to turn out to be a cosy romance. In fact, to all intents and purposes, *Middlemarch* does turn out cosily, and we may claim that references to frozen stares and sarcastic destinies are unjustified by subsequent developments.¹⁰

Apart from this one paragraph, there is little suggestion that Lydgate and Dorothea are attracted to each other. *Middlemarch*’s double-plot offers little opportunity for bringing Lydgate and Dorothea into close contact, but Lydgate is the obvious doctor to look after Casaubon as he nears death. Dorothea asks Lydgate for his advice on how to look after her husband:

For years after Lydgate remembered the impression produced in him by this involuntary appeal — this cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium, the same troublous, fitfully-illuminated life (xxx, 324)

If Lydgate does remember it, it produces no obvious effect on his actions, and the text of *Middlemarch* includes no indication that Lydgate ever wished that he had married Dorothea.

The effectiveness of George Eliot’s strategy may be judged from the numerous reviews which regretted Dorothea’s decision to marry the more admirable Ladislav, rather than the popular Lydgate.¹¹ Suddenly, what might have appeared too predictable an ending was not strong enough, although critics would have been hard-pressed to find reasons *why* Ladislav is not a suitable match for Dorothea.¹² Such is

9 See p. 332, n. 36.

10 In her defence, however, it is possible that, at this stage, George Eliot had not made a final decision that Dorothea’s story was going to end happily. The first draft of the novel had not been completed when this section was published.

11 See, e.g. the review of *Middlemarch* in the *Spectator* of June 1st, 1872, probably written by R.H. Hutton, in *George Eliot and her Readers; a Selection of Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Laurence Lerner and John Homstrom (London: Bodley Head, 1966), pp. 78-83.

12 It is difficult to isolate any specific faults attributed to Ladislav. He is dedicated, sensitive, artistic, and gentle, indeed the perfect complement for Dorothea’s own qualities.

the power of our subliminal generic expectations, and the reader may be frustrated that he has invented a more interesting projection of the plot than the one which is actually chosen.

Despite such criticism, George Eliot employed a similar manoeuvre with still more daring and originality in *Daniel Deronda*. If the story were told in chronological order, perhaps starting with Deronda's saving of Mirah, the *reader* would undoubtedly expect that two such obviously admirable characters would finally wed, despite their ostensible racial differences.

But the entire "flashback" organisation of *Daniel Deronda* is designed primarily to foster the impression that this is to be the story of the love of Deronda and Gwendolen Harleth, a tale which will probably end in some kind of disaster for one or both parties. As it turns out, their stories are not connected to anything like the degree that we have been persuaded to expect.

The first chapter, which takes us to Leubronn *after* the respective meetings of Deronda and Mirah, and Gwendolen and Grandcourt, inevitably convinces the *reader* that Deronda and Gwendolen are set to become the romantic hero and heroine of the novel.

From the first six words of the text ("Was she beautiful or not beautiful?"), we expect romance, especially when Gwendolen catches sight of the handsome Deronda while playing at the gaming table:

'Faites votre jeu, mesdames et messieurs,' said the automatic voice of destiny from between the mustache and imperial of the croupier; and Gwendolen's arm was stretched to deposit her last poor heap of napoleons. 'Le jeu ne va plus,' said destiny. And in five seconds Gwendolen turned from the table, but turned resolutely with her face towards Deronda and looked at him (i, 39).

Again the reference to Destiny underlines (artificially, some would say) the prospective significance of this scene within the completed text. Deronda goes out of his way to purchase and return the necklace which Gwendolen had had to pawn to meet her gambling debts.

Gwendolen thinks nothing of it at the time, but the *reader* knows better, and this scene certainly remains in his memory through the succeeding 145 pages, in which the title character is not mentioned at all, and Gwendolen becomes involved with the potentially villainous Grandcourt.

(ii) The Effect of Suspense Structures on Psychological Analysis and Verisimilitude

It is easy to overlook the price that George Eliot paid in many of her texts in order to achieve the uncertainty of the Austenian romance structure, most particularly the cost in terms of psychological analysis. George Eliot's texts inevitably stand or fall today according to our estimation of their psychological realism but, as we saw in Chapter Three, the Austenian romance imposes severe constraints on the presentation of hero and heroine.

A large proportion of *Middlemarch*, for example, is devoted to the description of Dorothea's emotions and innermost thoughts, yet that picture can hardly be regarded as completely satisfying because there is little direct indication that she loves Ladislav or even feels any strong feelings of attraction towards him. Similarly, our understanding of Ladislav's emotional development may be considered less than complete since there is not much sign that he loves Dorothea. Yet, from a generic perspective, it would be possible to argue that there are still too many indications that they will eventually marry.

In the Austenian romance, when the hero and heroine finally admit that they love one another and wish to marry, there is generally some reason why they did not discover that love earlier. Emma, for example, was not mature enough to know her own mind, and to understand that the man she really admired was Mr Knightly and not Frank Churchill. Mary Garth would not marry Fred Vincy until he had proved that he was not a worthless good-for-nothing. But it is difficult to make such a retrospective analysis of the Dorothea-Ladislav romance, and this lack of justification for delay indicates one major structural weakness of *Middlemarch*, the inability of the romance plot to illustrate one of the major chosen themes.

The Prelude, first published before any draft of *Middlemarch* was completed, gives us a good impression of the provisional thematic outline. Dorothea will be a latter-day Saint Teresa, whose instincts for goodness will be "dispersed among hindrances" (Prelude, p. 26). The envisioned "social" restriction is presumably the will of her first husband which ties her down to his money. This, in theory, would prevent her from following her natural instinct for goodness and for marrying the worthy, but far from rich, Will Ladislav.

But because the ensuing text, as an Austenian romance, must refrain from any indication that Dorothea loves Ladislav at all, there is little scope for showing that she does not marry Ladislav because this will mean losing most of her money and the respect of her family. Indeed, if

it had been revealed that she does not marry Ladislav because she was guided by such “worldly” motives, it would seriously compromise George Eliot’s description of her as a latter Saint Teresa.

The text fails to provide significant alternative obstacles to an earlier marriage of Dorothea and Ladislav. Their respective situations change little, and we are not told at the end that the £700 p.a., which was Dorothea’s all along, would prove insufficient to provide a basis for marital happiness. To divert the reader’s attention from the awkward omission in the logic of their relationship, *Middlemarch* contrives the spurious distraction of the supposed affair between Rosamond and Ladislav, which Dorothea happens to interrupt when she enters Rosamond’s drawing room:

Seated with his back towards her on a sofa which stood against the wall on a line with the door by which she had entered she saw Will Ladislav: close by him and turned towards him with a flushed tearfulness which gave a new brilliancy to her face sat Rosamond, her bonnet hanging back, while Will leaning towards her clasped both her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervour (lxxvii, 832).

Unlike Dorothea, we know too much about Will’s thoughts and feelings to take seriously the possibility that he could be declaring his love to Rosamond. But it is clear that this is what the *reader* is intended to suspect,¹ indeed that he is intended to experience a false anagnorisis. But a difficult compromise is necessary; how can the text create a situation which Dorothea can seriously misconstrue, and yet retain Will’s stature as a plausible hero? I think that for most readers it is the former requirement which suffers most. As a consequence of her visit, Dorothea endures a sleepless night:

In the chill hours of the morning twilight, when all was dim around her, she awoke — not with any amazed wondering where she was or what had happened, but with the clearest consciousness that she was looking into the eyes of sorrow (lxxx, 845).

But if the reader is not under the same misconception, the episode will inevitably appear over-written, and we look forward impatiently to the inevitable resolution. It is Rosamond herself who finally “explains” the misconception,² but it remains unclear why Ladislav was found in such a compromising position. The text necessarily evades this

1 This may be seen from a comparison of this episode’s presentation with that of a very similar scene in *Persuasion* (II, vii, 385) in which Wentworth sees Anne walking off arm in arm with Mr Elliot. In this case, the *reader* knows that there is no romantic attachment between Anne and Mr Elliot. While we know something of the workings of Ladislav’s mind, there is no indication that we should be sure that there is no attachment between him and Rosamond.

2 *Middlemarch*, VIII, lxxxi, 856.

impossible question. In the ideal Austenian romance structure, the main peripeteia, that moment in the narrative present when hero and heroine admit their love for one another, coincides as closely as possible with the *reader's* anagnorisis, the instant when he realises that the union is inevitable. But, in *Middlemarch*, the text is still inventing complications for a period after both the Fred-Mary and Dorothea-Ladislaw romances ought, by the text's own subliminal logic, to have been resolved.

Ladislaw could have been presented from such a distance that the *reader* would be unsure of his feelings towards Dorothea and Rosamond, and thus be prepared to accept Dorothea's suspicions. This would be achieved at a certain cost to psychological investigation, and thus to verisimilitude, in an age when these two things were coming to be regarded as synonymous. Within that assumption, George Eliot remains the most verisimilar of the Victorian novelists, but such verisimilitude is inevitably achieved at a certain cost to suspense and surprise.

Psychological verisimilitude involved the representation of an individual's state of mind in contemplation of certain actions, so that by the time character manifested itself in action, that action was not likely to be a surprise. Thus an inevitable gap between anagnorisis and peripeteia is created. For instance, an important peripeteia in *Daniel Deronda* is Gwendolen's decision to accept the proposals of Grandcourt despite the revelations of Lydia Glasher. An externalised presentation of this might have provided the *reader* with a pleasurable shock, tempered by the feeling that such an acceptance was implausible, but, instead, the text chooses to devote several pages to following Gwendolen's thoughts as she gradually determines to take this step.

Verisimilitude requires space. For any given plot-configuration, the larger the narrative space allotted to the presentation of each peripeteia, the easier it will be to achieve verisimilitude. The first marriage of Dorothea to a desiccated old pedant like Casaubon is an event which demands considerable psychological justification. But Book One of *Middlemarch* devotes itself to the task of making this one act plausible, and few would doubt that it succeeds in its attempt. The impatient reader of today may become frustrated at the leisurely verisimilar presentation of George Eliot's texts, the long gaps between important peripeteiai and the lack of true surprises.

To a literary criticism which has always refused to recognise the value of the "sensational" component in narrative, George Eliot has always been assured of a high ranking. But this is only by comparison with Dickens, Hardy, and others. George Eliot found a compromise between the plot- and mystery-dominated narratives which were becoming

popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century,³ and a psychological verisimilitude which gives life to those plot situations, and prevents them descending to the level of cerebral puzzles.

3 The short stories of Edgar Allan Poe had a considerable influence in this country in the middle of the nineteenth century. Two of the most popular novelists of the 1860s, Dickens and Wilkie Collins, were also discovering the possibilities of the genre and educating the public to understand this type of narrative (see pp. 193-98).

(iii) Other Mysteries in George Eliot's Novels

There are puzzles and secrets in every one of George Eliot's texts which, even though they do not dominate the text in the way that they do in the detective novel, nevertheless constitute an important presentational priority. As such, her mysteries can be judged by similar criteria to those adopted in our consideration of the Austenian romance.¹ Just as the Austenian heroine functions as a detective in her endeavour to determine the true characters of certain potential heroes, so many Victorian protagonists are confronted by a lack of knowledge concerning the circumstances of their own births. Again, if this becomes no more than a cerebral problem, it loses its value, and most discovered births reaffirm our emotional identification with the hero's fate. Yet there must be some narrative problem, and it is possible to identify certain criteria for the assessment of such "discovered birth" [genealogical] mysteries.

It is advisable, for example, that the mother and father of the hero should be characters who have already appeared in the narrative in person (e.g. Mrs Rouncewell), or have at least been mentioned in some other context. Otherwise their identification may seem the arbitrary invention of the narrative. This is the risk when *Deronda* discovers that his mother is Leonora Halm-Eberstein, not only Jewish, but a Princess as well. She is not mentioned in the preceding narrative, nor are there any aspects of the narrative which are reorganised by the discovery, except that the probability of his marrying Mirah is increased. *Deronda's* mother's only apparent function is to turn *Deronda* into a Jew and to facilitate a union which has seemed increasingly inevitable in the latter stages of the narrative, despite the reconstitution of the Seth-figure in Hans Meyrick.

Deronda is a reluctant detective in the discovery of his own parentage, just as he is in the search for Mirah's mother and her brother, Ezra Cohen. The shrewd reader will realise that the latter investigation has not necessarily ended with the discovery of one Ezra Cohen in London, especially since he does not seem to be an ideal brother for Mirah. Presumably, like *Deronda*, the *reader* is intended to experience a pleasurable anagnorisis when he discovers that Mirah's real brother is the more suitable Mordecai. This would be worth less if it were no more than the solution to a purely intellectual mystery, but the *reader* has developed an emotional interest in Mordecai's fate by this time,² and

1 See p. 78; p. 341, n. 7.

2 *Daniel Deronda*, xliii, 602.

should enjoy this family linking of two of the most sympathetic characters in the text.

This pleasure is not as acute as it might have been because most readers will not find the original Ezra as unsuitable as a brother as the text would have us believe. The text attempts to exploit conventional expectations regarding Jewish pawnbrokers, but there are too many hints of the sympathetic position which Ezra will eventually occupy within the text. Theme and plot work in opposition here. One of the major thematic endeavours of *Daniel Deronda* is to make us aware of Jews as human beings with problems which are distinct from and yet similar to our own, and, to achieve this, the Jewish characters are somewhat idealised.³ Because the plot contrives a situation in which we are glad that Mordecai, and not Ezra, is Mirah's brother, there is a simultaneous attempt to make us think well and badly of Ezra.

After Deronda's original meetings with the Cohen family, he is not glad that he has discovered them: "To Deronda just now the name Cohen was equivalent to the ugliest of yellow badges" (xxxvii, 525).⁴ Although Deronda's judgement is usually a reliable indication of the *author's* position, there will be few readers who do not suspect that Deronda will have later and better impressions of the Cohens. As with Deronda's own birth mystery, the final identification of Mordecai as Mirah's brother is not genuinely integrated into the text, and there is little advance in our understanding of the preceding text. We have no choice but to accept that it is a coincidence that Ezra Mordecai Cohen should happen to lodge with another Ezra Cohen.

Like *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* is often more adept in its handling of false expectations than in its presentation of the things which *do* occur. The latter part of the relationship between Gwendolen and Grandcourt is presented from a gradually increasing distance, as is the case in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. This allows the text to invite us to suspect, not that Grandcourt himself will die, but that he has some scheme to murder his wife. After a grim quotation from Shelley, Chapter 54 commences with the following ominous sentence:

Madonna Pia, whose husband, feeling himself injured by her, took her to his castle amid the swampy flats of the Maremma and got rid of her there, makes a pathetic figure in Dante's Purgatory, among the sinners who repented at the last and desire to be remembered compassionately by their fellow-countrymen. (liv, 731).

3 See George Eliot's letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe of Oct. 29th, 1876:

There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs.

The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight (London: O.U.P., 1956), VI, 301.

4 On this occasion, "just now" is a reliable nexal indicator of a change, a true temporal qualifier. See pp. 122-23.

Will Grandcourt attempt to kill Gwendolen while on his yachting expedition in the Gulf of Genoa? We are soon told that he has no intention of killing her at this stage,⁵ but we watch anxiously as the reluctant Gwendolen is persuaded to accompany her husband on a solitary trip in a small boat while their larger yacht is out of action.

There is little hint at the end of the chapter that natural causes will be responsible for any disaster,⁶ and the following chapter takes us to the mainland where, by coincidence, Deronda happens to be passing by. There has been a disaster in a small sailing boat, but at first the details of the catastrophe are unclear. One Frenchman speculates that “it was *milord* who had probably taken his wife out to drown her, according to the national practice...” (lv, 749). But our fears are ungrounded as the distant figure turns out to be a woman, Gwendolen herself. What has happened to Grandcourt? Deronda functions as detective for the *reader*, but it takes him a long time to make any sense of the hysterical Gwendolen. At last, she shudders and says:

“I will tell you everything now. Do you think a woman who cried, and prayed, and struggled to be saved from herself, could be a murderess?” (lv, 754)

This is one of the most brilliant pseudo-anagnorises in Victorian fiction because, in one brief instant, it seems to make sense of so much of the preceding text. At last, Gwendolen’s emotional progress slips into apparent focus and we feel that the potentiality to murder Grandcourt was indeed hidden deep within her character. We suddenly understand that, like Alec d’Urberville, Grandcourt has pushed Gwendolen beyond the levels of her endurance.

Deronda cannot believe his ears at first, as might be expected, and the text maintains the deception for a full seven pages as Gwendolen talks to Deronda in semi-coherent fashion, describing the temptations that she felt at Ryelands. The text is difficult to decipher but, clearly, some murder weapon had been available to her before and she had refrained from using it. But, eventually, Deronda persuades her to describe the events in the boat:

“I remember then letting go the tiller and saying “God help me!” But then I was forced to take it again and go on; and the evil longings, the evil prayers came again and blotted everything else dim, till, in the midst of them — I don’t know how it was — he was turning the sail — there was a

5 “In taking his wife with him on a yachting expedition, Grandcourt had no intention to get rid of her ...” (*Daniel Deronda*, liv, 732).

6 “They were taken out of the port and carried eastward by a gentle breeze. Some clouds tempered the sunlight, and the hour was always deepening towards the supreme beauty of evening” (*Daniel Deronda*, liv, 746).

gust — he was struck — I know nothing — I only know that I saw my wish outside me” (lvi, 761)

It is possible that Gwendolen was a little slow in throwing Grandcourt a rope, but there is now no question of her being responsible for the death of her husband. The reader relaxes and probably forgets the misconception which he had laboured under for a short period. But such short-term suspense structures, deliberate or otherwise, which we forget in retrospect, nevertheless constitute a considerable part of our enjoyment of narrative.⁷

In creating this false impression, the text has lost something, in that it is unable to present the incident in the small boat in the narrative present and to describe the thoughts of these two important characters at the moment of crisis. But Gwendolen’s account is presumably to be considered an accurate description of her own feelings on this occasion. There are many occasions when the desire to provide a detailed, developmental characterisation conflicts with the attempt to retain certain narrative secrets. In *Adam Bede*, for example, the text is extremely reluctant to tell us that Hetty has been seduced, became pregnant, had a baby, and let it die, until the complete secret is revealed in one line in Chapter 39.⁸ Yet, curiously, it might be said that all these events are described in considerable detail, indeed from Hetty’s own perspective.

At the end of Book Four (Chapter 35), Hetty’s marriage to Adam is fast approaching, yet she is contemplating suicide. Much depends on whether the reader asks himself why. Have the lasting effects of Arthur’s desertion of her been sufficient to cause such feelings? There are some clues that Hetty is pregnant, but no direct statement:

After the first on-coming of her great dread, some weeks after her betrothal to Adam, she had waited and waited, in the blind vague hope that something would happen to set her free from her terror; but she could wait no longer (IV, xxxv, 351)

It might be claimed that this represents no more than the characteristic Victorian evasion of any explicit reference to such matters as pregnancy, and it is indeed probable that a contemporary reader would have found it easier to interpret this part of the text than the average reader nowadays.

While the larger part of the contemporary readership would have inferred that Hetty was pregnant after she runs away, if only through an accumulation of indirect clues, a much smaller number will

7 See, e.g., the presentation of the strange event at the end of Chapter Nine of *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1979, 1st pub. 1860).

8 *Adam Bede* (London: Dent, 1973; 1st pub. 1859), xxxix, 392.

understand that Hetty has actually had the child, an event which presumably takes place at the beginning of Chapter 37, hidden in a few highly misleading words.⁹

But it is extremely difficult to determine where the narrative ellipse may be located. Much of the description of Hetty's stay at the *Green Man*, and of her "illness" there, achieves an indirection which ensures that the reader feels a frustrating context inadequacy.¹⁰

The main weakness of this mystery plot is that there is no opportunity to infiltrate witnesses of the events who are misled in much the same way that the *reader* is supposed to be misled, so it is difficult to create a wrong impression of simple, straightforward actions. After the childbirth takes place off-stage, Hetty carries the baby in a basket out into the country, where she hopes to find an opportunity to fulfil her intention to commit suicide, but again there is no indication that the basket is carried for the purpose of transporting a child. Hetty heads for Stratford, where there are

fields among which she thought she might find just the sort of pool she had in her mind. Yet she took care of her money still; she carried her basket: death seemed still a long way off, and life was so strong in her! (V, xxxvii, 369-9)

The syntactical construction here encourages us to presume that the basket is for carrying money. Killing the baby is not an end in itself; rather, we are to presume that the basket must be hidden so that there will be no trace of her after she has drowned herself. At last, she finds a suitable pool:

She got up to look about for stones, and soon brought five or six, which she laid down beside her basket, and then sat down again. There was no need to hurry - there was all the night to drown herself in (V, xxxvii, 370)

It is clear that we are being encouraged to presume that the collection of stones is only an aspect of her suicide operation. We are told that there are buns in the basket, but the presence of a baby is never mentioned. There are equivocal indications that Hetty goes through with her plan to hide the basket before the chapter ends and Hetty is abandoned by the text.

Instead, we follow Adam who, detective-like, sets himself to discover the truth of the mystery. But he, and we, must wait until Chapter 39, when Mr Irwine reveals that Hetty has been arrested: "For a great crime — the murder of her child" (V, xxxix, 392). For many readers, this will indeed be a pleasurable anagnorisis, as the preceding chapters

9 Adam Bede, V, xxxvii, 362, or, possibly, 368-69.

10 See pp. 18-19.

concerning Hetty suddenly make sense. But it is a poor mystery, purchased by the text at too high a price. Unless we are aware of what is happening to Hetty, we will be in no position to appreciate the dilemma in her mind as it occurs, nor to feel a full sympathy for a situation which we cannot understand. The reader feels frustration at a mystery beyond his control, rather than suspense at a clearly-defined narrative problem. It is often the sign of a poor mystery that it cannot be identified without revealing the solution.

Hetty is exploited by the text of *Adam Bede* with a ruthless pragmatism which is common in the less accomplished of the Victorian novels. In much of the earlier part of the text, and throughout her sad journey in Chapters 35-37, she is the centre of consciousness, and our sympathy at her sorry plight is demanded at every point. But as soon as the narrative mystery is resolved, she is discarded by the text as quickly as possible, mainly because a continued description of her sorrow would not match the mood of romance of the last book of *Adam Bede*. We observe Hetty at her trial through Adam's sympathetic eyes, and we wait with her for execution.

Death is too harsh a penalty for Hetty within the context of a pastoral romance, and Arthur arrives with a pardon at the last moment, but how this pardon was gained the text does not have time to discuss.¹¹ Instead, Hetty is transported and no further mention of her is made save that she died some time later. The reader is thus asked to adjust, in a very short space of time, from great emotional involvement in Hetty's fate, to no interest at all. If the text has persuaded us to involve ourselves in Hetty's developing plight, we may well feel betrayed in our sense of her autonomy and reality by the crudity of her function, once it is revealed, within the overall narrative.

11 Here the justification for Arthur's success in gaining a pardon for Hetty is sacrificed to the sharpness of the peripeteia, as Arthur arrives at the end of Chapter 47. No mention of the trial or the reprieve now gained is made in the subsequent text.

(iv) *Silas Marner* and the Problems of Precision

George Eliot did write one novel which has all the virtues of the best of the Victorian machine plots. *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe* has a beautifully economical outline, and, in embryo, it is far superior to either *Middlemarch* or *Adam Bede*. The text's control of the first-time reader's expectations and misconceptions is unusually precise, and the plot is such that few other narrative pleasures need to be sacrificed to the maintenance of the mystery.

Our sympathy is won for two characters with very different problems. Marner, like Nostromo,¹ is the prisoner of his own crock of gold, and Godfrey Cass, with wife and child that he has disowned, and a blackmailing brother, seeks responsibility and the love of pretty Nancy Lammeter. Godfrey's story seems certain to end in tragedy because his mistakes are of such magnitude. More importantly, one of the first rules of narrative that we learn is that characters who try to suppress their guilty secrets never succeed. Truth always manifests itself in the end, [in the 19th century novel] and tragedy (as the forerunner of the machine plot in general) teaches us that certain actions have their inevitable consequences.

The pleasant surprise in reading *Silas Marner* is that the "inevitable" consequences of Godfrey's misspent youth never occur and, to all intents and purposes, his secret is not revealed until it no longer matters.² His wife dies on her mission to expose him, while Dunsey, who alone knows his secret, disappears mysteriously. The first-time reader feels sure that Dunsey will return to blight Godfrey's happiness once more. It is a pleasurable anagnorisis indeed when we discover that Dunsey has in fact fallen down the Stone Pit as he carried away Marner's gold, and so Godfrey's secret is buried in the most literal sense.

In retrospect, it seems quite plausible that Dunsey should have fallen into the unguarded pit in the darkness and thick fog. Certainly, there

1 *Silas Marner: the Weaver of Raveloe* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1967; 1st pub. 1861).

2 Similarly, in *Daniel Deronda*, there is a sequence of events which seems to be leading to imminent crisis as Gwendolen finds that life is not what she had expected once she has married Grandcourt and now feels tempted to murder him. In fact, such feelings are totally irrelevant to Grandcourt's death, which may be considered as an accident pure and simple. Gwendolen, like Silas, is the recipient of a fortunate release from a deterministic sequence.

have been enough references to the Stone Pit to establish its existence in the reader's mind.³ The clues are plainly there but we have missed them or, rather, been persuaded to miss them. The references to the Stone Pit register in our subconscious minds because we do not know that a mystery is being prepared. As with Hetty's journey in *Adam Bede*, we follow Dunsey in the narrative present until he is suddenly abandoned by the text. Dunsey becomes "closed" to the *reader*, at a point when he has learnt to anticipate that the actions and thoughts of all the characters in *Silas Marner* will remain open.

The solution to the mystery of Dunsey's disappearance is as appropriate to the thematic structure of *Silas Marner* as every other element in the dove-tailing double-plot. Metaphors which develop the comparison between Marner and the insect world of plodding, mechanical motion can also function as clues concerning Dunsey's disappearance. Here, for instance, is part of the description of Marner's mental progress after the theft:

It had been a clinging life; and though the object round which its fibres had clung was a dead disrupted thing, it satisfied the need for clinging. But now the fence was broken down — the support was snatched away. Marner's thoughts could no longer move in their old round, and were baffled by a blank like that which meets a plodding ant when the earth has broken away on its homeward path. The loom was there, and the weaving, and the growing pattern in the cloth; but the bright treasure in the hole under his feet was gone ... (x, 129).

Dunsey, plodding home, has blundered into the fenceless pit and, in a sense, the bright treasure is still in a hole under Marner's feet. But the reader is unlikely to see the clue that is hidden in this passage because it continues patterns of imagery which are to be found at many other points in the text.

The near-simultaneous deaths of Dunsey and Godfrey's wife transform, in their different ways, the lives of Marner and Godfrey, effectively allowing them to live happily ever after. These two coincidences terminate the familiar causal sequences which have been set in motion by the disasters of Godfrey's and Warner's early lives. Destiny is averted, but is it Chance or Providence which has so dramatically revived the fortunes of the two men? The *reader* is left to form his own conclusions on this point because both possible analyses are encouraged by the text. Thus the thematic of "causal" suspense structure is left comparatively unresolved despite the symmetry of the plot-peripeteiai.⁴

3 *Silas Marner*, i, 52; i, 55; iv, 83; iv, 87; iv, 88; xiv, 184.

4 Causal suspense is a sub-division of theme-suspense, referring specifically to our understanding of the *primum mobile* behind the action, rather than any clusters of

Our expectation of tragedy is fostered by references to destiny,⁵ and the paradigm suggested by the self-sufficient story of Marner's time at Lantern Yard. The story of his friendship for William Dane and his betrayal by the latter is as neatly ironical as anything in Hardy or Bierce, where faith in the workings of Providence is systematically eliminated. Besides its function as a false nexal indicator, the Dane story is also important to the subsequent text in that it provides an additional instance of the importance of Marner's cataleptic fits. If it could be seen that Marner's fits of motionlessness were only relevant as a convenient means to achieve the magical appearance of Eppie at his hearth, our sense of the plausibility of this plot would be weakened. Here we see the law of *double functionality* in operation, the principle that an unusual narrative motif (in this case, Marner's catalepsy), which makes possible a particularly striking peripeteia, should also act as an integral part in another unconnected casual sequence.

The plot of *Silas Marner* achieves, with very few rough edges, extreme yet plausible peripeteiai which happily transform the lives of the two characters that we care most about. But these surprising reversals do not necessitate many artificial restrictions in the presentation of character, as in the case in *Middlemarch* and *Adam Bede*. It is not necessary that the *reader* should know less about situations in *Silas Marner* than the central characters should; indeed we know more about events than any of the characters; we alone know who has stolen Marner's gold, and our knowledge of the identity of the woman found dead in the snow on New Year's Eve is shared only by Godfrey. We can appreciate most of the ironies in characters' responses to these strange events from our superior vantage point.

As a combination of suspense structures both prospective and retrospective, *Silas Marner's* plot is superior to that of any other text by George Eliot, yet this short novel is rarely accorded the attention which is directed upon *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. There are two connected reasons for the comparative disregard of this short novel. Firstly, the text of *Silas Marner* does not prepare for its peripeteiai with the profusion of details, which achieve the impression of verisimilitude in the longer texts.

Although it would be difficult to make an accurate count, *Silas Marner* has as many plot-events as the longer texts, but the peripeteiai are much closer together. For instance, the scene in which Dunsey kills

images of a more specific nature, or any subject matter that is not perceived to be essential to the working out of the action. Hence, causal suspense may be considered as an intermediate category between plot and theme suspense.

5 e.g., *Silas Marner*, iii, 80. References to destiny are nexal indicators of the seriousness of the narrative.

Wildfire might have been presented in much greater detail, thereby lessening the pleasurable shock of the peripeteia. But the decision to ride and the accident are both presented in very short span:

But the inclination for a run, encouraged by confidence in his luck, and by a draught of brandy from his pocket-pistol at the conclusion of the bargain, was not easy to overcome, especially with a horse under him that would take the fences to the admiration of the field. Dunstan, however, took one fence too many, and got his horse pierced with a hedge-stake. (iv, 84-85)

But detail makes a plot live, and no matter how coherent and plausible the plot, it needs detail in order to establish its reality in the reader's mind.⁶

The second factor which has limited appreciation of *Silas Marner* is that the plot works *too* well, and reflects its themes too precisely. Although we cannot say that there is a specific thematic conclusion or rhetorical destination in *Silas Marner*, we feel that there is an attempt to convince us that, however black a situation in life may appear, help is just around the corner, and the world is a beautiful place after all. Because of the exchange of his gold for Eppie, Marner learns human love and a renewed faith in divine love. When Eppie has herself become a beautiful young woman, Marner can echo what the sympathetic Dolly Winthrop has been saying to him all along:

"Nay, nay," said Silas, "you're i' the right, Mrs Winthrop — you're i' the right. There's good i' this world — I've a feeling o' that now; and it makes a man feel as there's a good more nor he can see, i' spite o' the trouble an the wickedness. That drawing o' the lots is dark; but the child was sent to me: there's dealings with us — there's dealings" (xvi, 205)

It would appear that no plot could have been better chosen to exemplify this theme than the sequence of events which effects the exchange of the gold for Eppie.

But today we do not like our plots to "prove" our themes so exactly. We know that the plot is the invention and arbitrary choice of the author, and the plot must not be seen to have been chosen for some specifically rhetorical purpose. We feel that the fictional plot must only reflect a didactic intention (which we reckon to be beyond the narrative world itself, a part of the larger world of the author) in indirect fashion, so that it appears that the plot has come first and the thematic conclusion has emerged, by some magical process, from the working-out of the plot.

6 See, esp., *Reading the Victorian Novel: Detail into Form*, ed. Ian Gregor (London: Vision, 1980). In particular, David Blair's essay, "Wilkie Collins and the Crisis of Suspense" (pp. 32-50) demonstrates that detail is essential to bring a narrative to life.

This problem has affected every writer with didactic intentions who has chosen narrative fiction as his medium. In particular, the proponent of a religious faith, such as the Catholic novelist, must select his plots carefully so that they do not *seem* to have been chosen to prove certain ideas or articles of faith. In terms of impact upon a partially sceptical audience, for example, it would be a mistake to choose a fictional plot in which the protagonist lives in misery because he does not believe in the existence of a benevolent God, but, after a mystical vision, or some other clear evidence, learns to believe and lives happily ever after. If we know that the evidence which has changed the protagonist's mind is a fictional choice, an arbitrary textual selection, it is likely that we will react against this rhetorical approach (the equivalent of advertising's "hard sell"), and even feel less sympathetic to the ideas that are "proved" than before we commenced reading. If such a plot is chosen, as in *Anna Karenin*, for example,⁷ much greater efforts to achieve verisimilitude are necessary so that the text will not appear divisive.

More often, the text which is promoting a religious conviction does not show a clear-cut movement from misery to happiness as a result of certain specific occurrences. *Le Noeud de Vipères*, by Mauriac, a deeply-committed Catholic, is largely the I-narration of Louis, an embittered non-believer, whose heart, like Marner's, has been shrivelled up by his love for money and professional success, but there are no more than the awakenings of Christian feeling in the latter part of the book.⁸ Such a text is far more likely than *Silas Marner* to achieve a rhetorical or evangelical effect upon the sophisticated reader because theme and plot work at a tangent.

In Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, also an I-narration,⁹ the story is again not presented from the perspective of a committed Christian (the text keeps its distance from Sarah, for example), but from the viewpoint of the unhappy Maurice Bendrix. The inference that Bendrix would be much happier and more fulfilled if only he would choose to accept God's love and purpose for him is left for the reader to make. In the same fashion, the text makes no suggestion that the reason Bendrix survived the explosion in his house is because Sarah prayed for his safety, yet the *reader* is persuaded that this is the case.

7 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenin*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1954).

8 François Mauriac, *Le Noeud de Vipères* (London: Heinemann, 1951).

9 Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (London: Heinemann, 1951).

Successful didactic literature invites the *reader* to take a specific position in relation to the narrative, and yet contrives to make the *reader* feel that it is his own discovery and decision. Iser glimpses this rhetorical principle in his analysis of the nineteenth-century reader, who was not told what part he was supposed to play:

Instead, he had to discover the fact that society had imposed a part on him, the object being for him eventually to take up a critical attitude toward this imposition. For him to perform this function, i.e. to accept the role of critic, it was essential that the novel refrain from explicitly telling him what to do, for criticism must at least appear to be spontaneous if it is to have any value for the critic himself (*The Implied Reader*, pp xiii-xiv).

While Iser perhaps overemphasises the polemical intentions of nineteenth century literature, his general point is valid. But the theory can be extended to the classic realistic text in this period in other ways. Simply speaking, narrative might be a more convincing representation of life if its patterns were latent rather than immediately evident, forcing the *reader* to complete the picture for himself. The marvellously clear and symmetrical plot of *Silas Marner*, for example, is not so convincing as that of *Middlemarch* because there are no anomalies in its pattern. In achieving a precise plot and suspense structure, the text risks its own verisimilitude.

The Victorian public, as nowadays, preferred novels which attempted to deal with important questions of the nature of experience, the way things happen as they do, but novels which provided explicit conclusions to these theme suspense structures were considered didactic. It was easier for the popular novelist to offer a number of different resolutions to the questions that have been raised, and to make no clear choice between the different alternatives. The novelist's avoidance of being seen to commit himself to any one viewpoint is a little-considered aspect of the Victorian novel but particularly relevant, I feel, to our consideration of Hardy.¹⁰

Traditional literary criticism, which has striven to identify and elucidate the themes of the novels we admire, has rarely considered the possibility that the novelist may work hard to prevent the identification of a coherent thematic pattern directed to a specific end. George Eliot, for example, usually chose to work within genres, such as the Austenian romance, which hardly reflect her extra-novelistic views. But each genre has its own themes which George Eliot, for the most part, was content to reproduce. Her ideas may be traced to contemporaries

¹⁰ See pp. 247-255.

she admired,¹¹ but she remains a great teller of stories. In this chapter, I have attempted to redress the critical balance a little by considering the many ways in which her determination to maintain a number of suspense structures resulted in the sacrifice of qualities for which we usually tend to praise her most.

¹¹ For an account of George Eliot's intellectual mentors and influences, see Neil Roberts, *George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art* (London: Paul Elek, 1975).

Problems of Suspense in Dickens's Generic Experimentation

(i) Austenian Romance and Situation Comedy

Dickens employed a wide variety of literary genres, not new in themselves but rarely combined with such apparently careless abandon. In this section,

Dickens is the master of antithesis. His novels self-consciously persuade us to laugh at one moment and to cry at the next, preferably without pause in between. He demands a reader who is as agile as the Artful Dodger, capable of responding to the various juxtaposed types of narratives, feeling joy, sorrow, suspense, indignation, fear, amusement, perhaps prospective suspense, even gratitude, in quick succession. To achieve this rhetorical tour de force, we will consider some of the problems of suspense which Dickens encountered as he experimented with various generic combinations.

The four most easily distinguishable generic elements in Dickens's fiction are those of the ancient forms of tragedy and situation comedy, the Austenian romance, and a genre which was still in its infancy, the hermeneutic mystery.¹ Tragedy will be considered in Chapter Seven, and the Austenian romance has already been examined in some detail, so only a little needs to be said of these here. It would be possible to argue that Dickens did not write Austenian romances at all, that he merely chooses to round off his fictions with convenient marriages, as was normal in English fiction long before Jane Austen.

The main distinction between Jane Austen and her predecessors, I have argued, lies in the reader's expectations. If hero and heroine are clearly attached to each other, and it is merely a question of removing material obstacles (e.g., the disapproval of parents or society), an element of prospective suspense may be generated, but the structure can hardly be termed an Austenian romance.

The Austenian romance is distinguished primarily by the reader's inability to identify hero and/or heroine and by the establishment of alternative possibilities. Since character worth is not clearly established, suspense is as much retrospective as prospective. The

¹ See p. 339, n. 49.

distinction between the two forms is not always easily determined, and it is often difficult to tell whether the retarding force on romantic development is material or psychological. In *Little Dorrit*, for example,² Pet Meagles may be said to be a rival to Little Dorrit herself for Arthur's hand, but no reader is seriously going to entertain the possibility that Arthur will choose Pet rather than Amy. The major delaying influence is the financial fortune of the Dorrit and Clennam families, and it would be an overstatement to say that the narrative of *Little Dorrit* is contained within a superstructure of Austenian romance.

But in *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, there are at least three possible and plausible candidates to become the wife of the hero. Dickens negotiates the daring ploy of having David actually marry one candidate, Dora, at an intermediate stage, before resolving the romance structure more satisfactorily at the end. But it is important to note that Dora is not overtly discredited, and it is thus by no means inevitable that she will be removed to make way for Agnes Wickfield. Tragedy and Austenian romance are awkwardly combined here, but Dickens does not undercut the pathos to be felt at Dora's death in order that Agnes should seem to be the only suitable wife for David, a tactic which might have strengthened the romance ending.

Great Expectations sets up a typical Austenian formula; the beautiful but unsuitable girl whom the hero is attracted to for much of the text versus the kind but little considered girl under his nose all along. The unpremeditated victory of the former is a surprising, yet strangely satisfying, variation of the Austenian pattern, and this must rank as Dickens's most successful essay in the form.³ It is only when the genre has become firmly established that a surprise can be created by the

2 All quotations and references to Dickens's novels are taken from the Oxford Illustrated Dickens series, published by O.U.P. between 1947 and 1956. The original dates of publication are as follows:

The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (1837)
The Adventures of Oliver Twist (1838)
The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby (1839)
The Old Curiosity Shop (1841)
Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty (1841)
The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit (1844)
Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son: Wholesale, Retail, and for Exportation (1848)
The Personal History of David Copperfield (1850)
Bleak House (1853)
Hard Times for These Times (1854)
Little Dorrit (1857)
A Tale of Two Cities (1862)
Great Expectations (1862)
Our Mutual Friend (1865)
The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870)

Fuller details are to be found in the bibliography.

3 I am aware that the text gives us no assurance that Pip and Estella will eventually marry, but they are certainly united in the reader's mind. See my consideration of the conclusion of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, p. 73, above.

hero marrying the girl who has been marked out for him all along. Dickens experiments with a similar pattern in *Our Mutual Friend*, in that the world expects John Harmon, from an early age, to marry Bella Wilfer and thus inherit his fortune, but there is no Biddy in the background to act as a plausible rival.

Again, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Drood and Rosa Bud voluntarily cancel the engagement that has been arranged for them. It is unclear whether Drood was intended to survive John Jasper's treachery, but it is more likely that the pattern would have been repeated and he would have voluntarily chosen to marry the girl he has given up. Helena Landless's major role within the narrative seems to be as a rival for Drood's affections, but Dickens was usually much more careless with his pseudo-heroines than Jane Austen and George Eliot. But the greater the number of other genres with which the Austenian romance is combined, the less vital it is to achieve an ending that is unexpected.

Unlike Jane Austen for the most part, Dickens combines his romances with large elements of situation comedy. By situation comedy I intend to signify a form which is rather more specific than comedy as an overall term can ever be.⁴ Situation comedy is that type of comedy in which the audience is placed one step ahead of a narrative situation. The reader, in a position of comparative omniscience, understands every character's aspirations and intentions, and sees why they are unlikely to be fulfilled. Unlike the reader of Austenian romance and mystery, who knows comparatively little of the hopes and intentions of even the central characters, the first-time reader knows very little less than the author himself.

The School for Scandal is a good example of sitcom in that the audience is made aware of deceptions and misunderstandings even before they occur.⁵ We know of the motives of Joseph Surface and Lady Sneerwell, and the disguises of Sir Oliver; we know that Lady Teazle loves Sir Peter all along.⁶ Suspense is primarily prospective, concerned with the relative success of the plans of each, but it is limited by the lack of seriousness perceived in the situation. Our pleasure is similar to that gained from the apprehension of irony, a comparison between

4 Critics who have attempted to find common factors in all the texts they perceive to be comic are forced to become so vague that their definitions of comedy are not particularly helpful. See, e.g., Roger Henkle's definition, *Comedy and Culture: England 1820-1900* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 7.

5 Richard B. Sheridan, *The School for Scandal* in *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brinsley Sheridan*, ed. Cecil Price (Oxford: O.U.P., 1973), I, 285-443.

6 The motives of Joseph Surface are established, II, ii, p. 383; those of Lady Sneerwell, I, i, p. 361; the disguises of Sir Oliver, III, i, p. 387; that Lady Teazle loves Sir Peter is implied by III, iii, but is not so clear.

characters' mistaken notions of themselves or situations and their true position.

This is the pleasure of knowledge rather than suspenseful ignorance, but it is not so much that the cycle of suspense and resolution has disappeared as that it has been accelerated and repeated to the point where we are unaware of the period of suspense and only conscious of the resolution.⁷ Whether the comedy is situational or verbal, the combination of contexts which creates humour is unexpected. Such a bisociation often exploits the reader's knowledge or memory of things in the world beyond the text, and it is not easy to identify a period of suspense. A pun, for example, relies on the reader's awareness of different possible meanings of the same sound, a knowledge which the text may have no need to reinforce.

Satire, a related form, creates pleasure by examining a situation which is probably already familiar to the reader from an unexpected perspective or by comparison with another situation with which it is not normally connected.

In Chapter Two, I suggested that the history of literature reveals a gradual movement away from genres which rely on the pleasures of knowledge towards those genres which rely on the pleasures of ignorance or suspense, and which work towards much bigger anagnorises in which a number of aspects of the text suddenly make sense. Dickens's career shows something of the same progression in miniature.

The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club falls easily into the picaresque tradition of sitcom, which follows the adventures of a likeable rogue.⁸ In each self-contained episode, the reader is likely to be aware of the motives and misconceptions of the characters involved. There are a number of set situations in which such misconceptions can be savoured to the full. A girl disguised as a boy may receive the amorous advances of another woman who is, unlike the audience, unaware of the disguise.⁹ Somewhat more ambitious is the scene in which one character's proposals of marriage are completely misconstrued by another, or where an innocuous conversation is understood as a proposal. *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*,

⁷ See the discussion of Koestler's concept of bisociation, p. 23 ff.

⁸ For an analysis of the structural properties of picaresque, see George Tylor Northup's introduction to *Selections from the Picaresque Novel* (Boston: Heath, 1935). Throughout, I shall use sitcom as a convenient abbreviation for situation comedy.

⁹ e.g., Viola's disguise in *Twelfth Night*, ed. J.M. Lothian and T.W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975).

Northanger Abbey, *Pickwick Papers*, and *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* are amongst the many novels which exploit this standard situation for comic effect.¹⁰

Sitcom fits comparatively easily into the framework of Dickens's early novels which might usefully be classified as adventure stories. The adventure may be distinguished by the high degree to which the reader is encouraged to participate in the spatiotemporal situation of the protagonist. The hero of adventure faces immediate threats to continued existence or satisfactory development, unlike the hero of mystery who struggles to discover something in the narrative past, and the protagonist of sitcom who strives to gain something, to project a narrative future. The reader of sitcom glimpses the future in which the various misconceptions will be cleared up, while the reader of mystery is not even aware of certain crucial elements in the narrative past. The adventure, as the *via media* in terms of tense, can most easily accommodate the other two forms, while sitcom and mystery are only amalgamated with difficulty.

But there are important differences between adventure and mystery. Adventure is linked to freedom of movement or decision, or the regaining of that freedom. In this respect, adventure may be said to contrast with other genres of the Victorian period which are dominated by various systems of cause and effect, deterministic and even mechanical in operation. Adventure is antithetical to the Victorian notion of plot in that it insists on man's ability to reconstruct himself and his world anew in every moment, to make decisions and take chances which will have unforeseen consequences for better or worse. Sea stories offer excellent possibilities for adventure since a ship may, at any moment, be plunged into a crisis by the caprice of the elements. Nothing matters outside the narrative present and the sailors' attempts to negotiate their own survival. If the storm passes, pirates may be waiting for the ship in the next chapter, or shipwreck on a desert island. The protagonist of adventure is continually living on his wits from one largely unconnected episode to the next.

Picaresque is usually a combination of adventure and sitcom but, after *Pickwick Papers*, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens showed a declining interest in the loose forms of adventure as far as *The Life and Adventure of Martin Chuzzlewit* and *The Personal History of David Copperfield* which revive the forms of adventure for the last time in his career. Martin Chuzzlewit's trip to America was designed to interrupt a causal sequence which had not proved sufficiently interesting to Dickens's readership, and to revive interest with a few adventures not determined by the narrative past. But, for the

¹⁰ Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (London: O.U.P., 1936; 1st pub. 1771), pp. 168-72; *Northanger Abbey* I, xv; *Pickwick Papers* xii, pp. 150-56; *Nicholas Nickleby* ix.

most part, Dickens gradually became more interested in “hence” than “and then” generic types, of which mystery is the most obvious example.¹¹

In the mystery, every element of the narrative is determined by some event which has already taken place, possibly even before the start of the narrative. Until the mystery has been resolved, the lives of the characters cannot continue in normal fashion, in the murder mystery, for example, there is a corpse which must be accounted for, and the actions of murderer and investigators are determined by the need to hide or uncover the secret. But sometimes the reader may not be aware that there is any riddle to be solved and may presume that the action is proceeding according to some other principle. In reading *Great Expectations*, for example, we may not be aware that there is any mystery attached to the origins of Pip’s fortune.¹² Indeed, if we realised that there was any doubt about the identity of Pip’s benefactor, we would be half-way to the solution. In such cases, we may categorise the narrative as adventure-turned-to-mystery, since we discover retrospectively that there has been a cause and effect sequence in operation which has determined the narrative continuation.

In the presentation of any given narrative configuration, this is largely a matter of authorial choice. We might contrast Dickens’s presentation of Veneering’s election campaign in *Our Mutual Friend* (even if it is hardly more than an anecdote) with Sheridan’s presentation of Sir Oliver’s schemes in *The School for Scandal*. *Our Mutual Friend* repeatedly asks the prospective suspense question – will Veneering win the election? – before redefining his every move as futile. In *The School for Scandal*, we see the comparative redundancy of much of the surface brothers’ conduct in advance, because we know that they are the dupes of Sir Oliver’s tests. Thus very few comic possibilities need be wasted through the audience’s incomprehension. Because Dickens keeps his reader in ignorance of certain crucial facts about Veneering’s campaign, he sacrifices many possible comic effects in order to achieve a pleasurable (and comic) anagnorisis as the adventure is turned retrospectively to mystery. In even smaller span, the presentation of the Lammle wedding reveals the same priorities, and most of the immediate opportunities for comedy are sacrificed.

¹¹ The distinction between “hence” and “and then” narratives is proposed by Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: a Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 47-48.

¹² See pp. 198-204.

(ii) The History of Mystery

In terms of genre, therefore, Dickens's career shows the gradual ascendancy of the hermeneutic mystery and a concomitant tendency to place the *reader*, even if he does not know it, in a world of which he has insufficient knowledge. In the rest of this chapter, we will consider primarily the gradual sophistication of strategies of retrospective suspense and the long apprenticeship which Dickens had to serve in this form. For, of all the genres which Dickens chose to work with, mystery was furthest from fulfilling its aesthetic possibilities at the start of the Victorian period.

In the history of any genre, we may distinguish three stages; firstly, discovery and exploration of possibilities; secondly, maturity, and thirdly, entropy. Stasis is improbable,¹ and each form must discover unprecedented variations in order to retain its vitality, just as a virus must evolve to keep one step ahead of medicine, although a traditional formulaic presentation may still remain possible.

Tragedy reached full maturity in English literature in the plays of Shakespeare and subsequent tragedians have often felt compelled to seek new variations, for instance, to employ new types of causality. Chaucer discovered or perfected most of the generic possibilities of sitcom, while Austenian romance was indeed not fully mature before Jane Austen. But the hermeneutic mystery was by no means a fully developed form in the Victorian period, and there was no paradigm of structural perfection for Dickens to copy.²

No genre can suddenly appear *in vacuo* and I think that it is clear that mystery may be said to combine the strong sense of cause and effect which is assumed by tragedy with certain aspects of traditional comedy and romance. As part of the discovery of identity which was crucial to the closure of romance, it was usual for the hero(ine) to discover his or her true parents at the end of the story. From the classical period through to George Eliot and others, it gradually became more fashionable to keep the audience as well as the hero(ine) in the dark about the true family relationships, thereby introducing a small element of mystery and surprise. There was, of course, little point in

1 For another, conflicting view of the evolution of genre, see Northrop Frye, "Literary History", *NLH*, XII, (1980–81), 219–26. Frye maintains that the comparative stability of comedy and romance is due to the pervasive influence of the Bible.

2 It is a commonly held view that Edgar Allan Poe was a master of the arts of mystery. It is true that he did much to develop the form, but the handful of detective stories that he wrote are each lacking in many of the qualities which make a good mystery (see p.341, n. 7). Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Tales*, ed. Julian Symonds (Oxford: O.U.P., 1980). For Collins's contribution to the genre, see pp. 193–98.

developing the question of parentage into a mystery if the audience knew the story in advance, so it is primarily in narrative forms like the novel which exploited unfamiliar plots that the audience is not made aware of the true situation.

As the final discovery, or set of discoveries, became something of a cliché, greater and greater ingenuity was required in the eventual linking of parents with supposed orphans or foundlings. *Joseph Andrews*, for example, parodies the numerous reversals which could be generated with comparative ease.³ Yet *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* exploits a similar plot without parodic intention, and the ending is a determination of the narrative past in the discovery of Tom's true parents.⁴ Despite its implausibility, the device was still very much alive in the Victorian period, and *Oliver Twist* sets up a typical discovered birth mystery. But this text also reveals many of the weaknesses of this type of mystery when compared with the murder mystery.

The main problem is that the circumstances of the hero's conception do not often determine the subsequent actions of a sufficiently large number of characters in the later narrative. There is unlikely to be any investigative character or another whose actions are determined by the need to keep the secret. This makes it very difficult to distribute clues, and the risk is therefore that, all too often, parents are assigned to the protagonist but his own life is hardly affected. Characteristically, the novelist's strategy to counteract this weakness is the creation of an inheritance which the protagonist may or may not earn once his parentage is determined, and financial security becomes a constituent part of the romantic resolution.

Daniel Deronda reveals another closely related device to counter the problem of insignificance, in that the protagonist discovers that he belongs to a particular social or racial group and thus becomes eligible for some of its advantages. Hardy, as so often, uses the convention in reverse in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. The discovery of the Durbeyfields' noble ancestors does not yield the expected advantages, but contributes significantly to their many misfortunes.⁵ A further major structural problem of the discovered birth mystery is the difficulty of introducing suspects and creating false leads. It is difficult to invent indications

3 Henry Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr Abraham Adams* (London: O.U.P., 1970; 1st pub. 1742).

4 *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (London: Macmillan, 1904; 1st pub. 1749). The secret is revealed by Mrs Waters (XVIII, vii).

5 Hardy favours the technique of subverting traditional narrative conventions and their consequences in this fashion. The resolution of the discovered birth mystery in *The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge: a Story of a Man of Character* (London: Macmillan, 1974; 1st pub. 1886) contributes to tragedy rather than a happy conclusion.

which suggest hidden family relationships which can eventually be discredited.

The Gothic novel, also full of familial mysteries, extended the generation of retrospective suspense to other narrative mysteries, most commonly strange occurrences at a castle. In the Radcliffean variety, although not in most earlier Gothic texts, the “supernatural” events are explained at the close of the action, so that everything is enclosed within a rational, empirical account. Sometimes this rational explanation is not very convincing and the mystery is the least skilfully worked element in the text.⁶ It is also, arguably, in the Gothic novel that we first see the central character performing a role comparable to that of the modern detective, investigating aspects of the narrative past, exploring castles and making frightening discoveries.⁷

The heroine-as-detective becomes sufficiently commonplace to merit parody in *Northanger Abbey*. But it is noticeable there that Jane Austen does not take the obvious step of revealing that Catherine’s fears are unfounded, and her searches ridiculous, in advance, so much potential sitcom is blunted for the first-time reader. Even in retrospect, General Tilney cannot be revealed to be innocent of all Catherine’s suspicions because he also has a genuine part to play as an obstacle to the fulfilment of the romance plot. *Northanger Abbey* makes an awkward presentational compromise in which the pleasures of parody and retrospective suspense (in both the romance and Gothic plots) tend to cancel each other out.

As was suggested in Chapter Three, the Austenian heroine is herself important as a forerunner of the detective, since her primary objective is to discover something that is already there, her own true feelings and the true characters of the men that she meets. The Austenian romance is at least as important in the history of the development of the hermeneutic mystery (specifically the detective story) as such more obvious investigative protagonists as Caleb Williams and Vidocq.⁸

6 See, e.g., Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho: A Romance* (London: O.U.P., 1966; 1st pub. 1794). This is, perhaps, inevitable at this date.

7 It would also be possible to maintain that we first see such an investigative protagonist in the more sophisticated versions of the Arthurian legends, especially insofar as the object of the knights' quest (the Holy Grail) is not fully understood by the knights themselves. The Middle English masterpiece, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, carries many of the hallmarks of the adventure-turned-to-mystery; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon (Oxford: O.U.P., 1967; 2nd ed.).

8 These are the forerunners of the detective usually cited by historians of the genre. See, esp., Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980); Gavin Lambert, *The Dangerous Edge* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1975); Ian Ousby, *Bloodhounds of Heaven: the Detective in English Fiction from Godwin to Doyle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976); Eugene Vidocq, *Memoirs of Vidocq, The*

Most historians of the genre have made the mistake of tracing its roots as a result of an analysis of its surface attributes, most specifically, its emphasis on crime and criminal investigation.⁹ A more accurate picture is gained, I feel, by a consideration of the functions of the protagonist, the perspective of the audience, and the types of pleasure which it seeks to arouse.

French Police Spy (London: Routledge, 1884; 1st pub. 1828); William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (London: O.U.P., 1970; 1st pub. 1794).

9 Knight, Lambert, and Ousby (see n. 20) each seeks the roots of mystery in fiction which takes crime as its subject.

(iii) Dickens's Early Failures

It was not until the Victorian period that the mystery structure was developed into a form which is immediately recognisable today, notably in the fictions of Poe, Dickens and Wilkie Collins. In Dickens, the connections with the old mysteries of discovered birth are most clearly apparent. *Oliver Twist* makes a gallant attempt to transform the intractable materials of Oliver's mysterious birth into a secret that is still relevant as a casual explanation of other aspects of the narrative. Oliver is the illegitimate son of the wealthy Edward Leeford and the mistress of whom Leeford was particularly fond. Leeford hated his true wife and wicked son (Monks), so, when he dies, he bequeaths most of his property to Oliver, provided that he does not lead a life of crime in his youth. It is therefore plausible that Monks should set himself to turn Oliver into a criminal and claim the property for himself.

Like Oliver, we know nothing of all this and we are very unlikely to guess. As Oliver wanders through his dream-like (often nightmare-like) childhood, we have no idea why he should be spied upon by the fearsome Monks. Despite the introduction of a character, Monks, whose actions are determined by a knowledge of the narrative secret, it remains difficult to distribute the type of clue which will surface retrospectively. Both Oliver's parents are dead and Monks himself only appears on the periphery of the action. So the solution, when it finally comes, does not add a new perspective to enough of the preceding text to provide a satisfactory anagnorisis. We may recall that Monks complained to Fagin in Chapter Twenty at his failure to turn Oliver into a true criminal, but the circumstances of the will are certain to remain unguessable for the majority of readers.

The same can hardly be said for the central mystery of *Barnaby Rudge: a Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty*. Here the solution of the mystery may be easily deduced, and indeed was so,¹ from the data as it was presented at the end of the first instalment. According to Solomon Daisy's story, Mr Reuben Haredale was found dead in his bed and his money stolen. His steward (Rudge, the father of the title character) and gardener have both disappeared:

1 Edgar Allan Poe's celebrated, and largely successful, attempt to solve the mystery of *Barnaby Rudge* first appeared in the *Philadelphia Saturday Evening Post* (May 1st, 1841) while a second review appeared in *Graham's* in Feb. 1842. Details are to be found in John Walsh, *Poe the Detective: the Curious Circumstances behind the Mystery of Marie Roget* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1968), p. 41. The second review is a particularly shrewd critique of the problems inherent in a mystery which is solved at an early stage by a significant proportion of its readership. This essay is reprinted as "Dickens's 'Barnaby Rudge'", *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1895), VII, 39-64.

“The steward and gardener were both missing and both suspected for a long time, but they were never found, though hunted far and wide. And far enough they might have looked for poor Mr Rudge, the steward, whose body — scarcely to be recognised by his clothes and the watch and ring he wore — was found, months afterwards, at the bottom of a piece of water in the grounds, with a deep gash in the breast where he had been stabbed with a knife. He was only partly dressed; and people all agreed that he had been sitting up reading in his room, where there were many traces of blood, and was suddenly fallen upon and killed before his master” (i, 14)

In fact, it turns out that Rudge has murdered both his master and the gardener, disguising the latter with his own clothes, watch and ring. Why should we anticipate that from the above description? We are more likely to solve the mystery *because* it is set up as an unsolved riddle. “Everybody now knew that the gardener must be the murderer,” yet the gardener has not been heard of for twenty-two years.

The experienced reader of mystery will inevitably scrutinise all the available evidence for some kind of loophole. Such a reader soon grasps two of the most basic rules of the genre, that death is only provisional and nothing is what it seems. As in the Austenian romance, if “people all agree” something, it is very likely to be wrong. Only a description of death stamped with the author’s own signature may be regarded as reliable. The above passage is the account offered by Solomon Daisy, and no second-hand account in fiction is immutable, especially when it concerns a death. Injuries supposed fatal may prove not to be so. Mistaken identity is an easily managed stand-by, or death itself may be feigned.² Characters are often assumed dead because they have disappeared for a number of years, but they invariably reappear at the most crucial moments even in the most serious of fictions (e.g. *The Mayor of Casterbridge*). Any description of a corpse is to be carefully noted, and it is clear here that there is very little real evidence that the body in the water is Rudge.

Dickens was writing for an audience with much less experience of murder mystery in general, and the unrecognisable corpse deception in particular, but Solomon Daisy’s story is to be found at the end of the first instalment, allowing an unlimited time for reflection and reconsideration of the evidence. The reader who is adept at this type of problem will anticipate that Rudge will reappear in some disguise, and eventually be recognised for what he is. But even the cursory reader ought to understand what is happening, soon afterwards, with the description of the figure who is menacing Rudge’s “widow”. It is not at all clear what the *reader* is intended to make of this ghost-like creature or Mrs Rudge’s response:

2 cf. Rokesmith’s deception in *Our Mutual Friend*, considered pp. 224–27.

There she stood, frozen to the ground, gazing with starting eyes, and livid cheeks, and every feature fixed and ghastly, upon the man he [Varden] had encountered in the dark last night (v. 43).

The text seems to be projecting a *reader*, brought up on the Gothic novel, who will interpret these ambiguous indications as a description of a supernatural experience, namely the appearance of Rudge's ghost. The problem is that there is no character inside the narrative who thinks that the man who pesters Mrs Rudge is a ghost, so there is no suitable medium through which to convey the impression of ghostliness. Indeed, it is very difficult for the text to tell us anything at all without giving away the fact that Rudge is still alive, an admission which would make the murder mystery and its solution redundant. Descriptions of the meetings between Mrs Rudge and her husband laboriously avoid giving any indication that there is a past relationship or any recognition on Mrs Rudge's part.

But if Rudge were not to reappear in this curious fashion, it is difficult to imagine how the mystery could have been developed at all. Rudge must appear in some guise, otherwise the revelation that he is the murderer will mean nothing to the reader. Further problems are caused by Dickens's desire to turn Rudge to other purposes altogether, notably as an example of one of his favourite themes, that if a man voluntarily gives up his name he becomes an outcast among men, wandering aimlessly from place to place. This theme is developed in Chapter Sixteen, and it necessitates a much more detailed description of Rudge's way of life. At this point, he is still being described as a "phantom" (xvi, 126) who is following Mrs Rudge, even though we now know too much about Rudge to have any suspicion that he is not a creature of flesh and blood, capable of acts of prosaic violence.

Unless the reader solves the mystery and sees what the text is trying to do, he will experience a high level of frustrating context inadequacy in the chapters which develop the mystery, irritated by the text's failure to tell him what is happening. When the solution is finally revealed, as late as Chapter Fifty-six, a few readers will experience a pleasurable anagnorisis as the text at last makes sense but, for many, it will only confirm what has been patently obvious from an early stage.

The deceptive strategies which Dickens employs along the way generally reveal his inexperience in the arts of mystery. Most obviously, there is the device of calling Mrs Rudge "the widow" on every occasion that she is mentioned. This would be satisfactory if Mrs Rudge were being described from the perspective of some other character who is under the impression that she is a widow. But, on the majority of occasions, she is described as "the widow" in the *author's* own voice. Like Mrs Rudge herself, the *author* knows full well that she is not a widow so

such a description, as Poe noted,³ must constitute an illegitimate deception.

The text finds it difficult to suggest alternative solutions to the mystery of the identity of the man who is troubling Mrs Rudge, ghost or not, since the true solution is the obvious one. One desperate attempt is made when Haredale suggests to Varden:

“Suppose she married incautiously — it is not improbable, for her existence has been a lonely and monotonous one for many years — and the man turned out a ruffian, she would be anxious to screen him, and yet would revolt from his crimes” (xxvi, 198).

Such an alternative might have been convincing if the text had provided any evidence in support of Haredale’s hypothesis, but this theory suggest no transformation of the perspective that we have on fictional data.

The successful example of mystery develops two basic and distinct sequences. Firstly, there is the *apparent* plot (or pseudo-plot), with its own coherent causal arrangement, often a familiar generic pattern. Secondly, there is the *transformed* plot, which re-appraises that apparent causal sequence and casts it in a new mould. Every mystery plot must have its plausible apparent perspective(s), otherwise it loses control of mystification and risks boredom. The text of *Barnaby Rudge* substantially fails to place its basic phenomena in an apparent causal sequence, and so it must adopt tactics of obscurity rather than deception. The evident failure of the mystery element in *Barnaby Rudge*, as reflected in its disappointing sales,⁴ presumably discouraged Dickens from further full-scale attempts at mystery for a number of years. It was not until more than ten years later, with the writing of *Bleak House*, that he again felt sufficiently confident to structure a text around a set of connected mysteries.

3 Poe, “Dickens’s ‘Barnaby Rudge’”, p. 51.

4 The sales of *Barnaby Rudge* declined in the course of serialisation to a much greater degree than those of any other novel. For details of sales figures, see John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens* (London: Dent, 1966; 1st pub. 1872–74), p. 302.

(iv) *Bleak House* and the Ultimate Discovered Birth Mystery

Bleak House is a transitional text in the history of mystery, because it combines one of the most sophisticated of all the discovered birth mysteries with a murder mystery which is more successful than that of *Barnaby Rudge*, yet still not completely satisfying. In both cases, the text takes the trouble to construct plausible alternative possibilities or pseudo-plots, notably that Jarndyce or Boythorn might be Esther's father, and that Lady Dedlock is the murderess of Tulkinghorn. Indeed, in the latter case, the links in the pseudo-plot are so convincing that eventually it is the transformed plot which seems comparatively weak and unconvincing.

But it is the mystery surrounding Esther's birth which is a startling exercise in textual ingenuity. Rather than conclude the text with a nominal linkage between the heroine and parents long since dead, Dickens contrives to include almost every character in the mystery structure, some as suspects, some as investigators, and some as carriers of clues. In fact there are really two mysteries, it being far more difficult to identify Esther's father than her mother, and two separate suspense structures. This causes problems in itself because the establishment of false suspects as Esther's father depends upon a presumption that Lady Dedlock is Esther's mother, a secret which has not yet been officially divulged by the text.

The formal revelation may be said to occur at the end of Chapter Twenty-nine, when Guppy tells Lady Dedlock of his belief that Esther is the child of Captain Hawdon. He does not say that Lady Dedlock is herself the mother, but this inference is combined a few lines later when Lady Dedlock is shown weeping for the child that she thought dead.¹

There will be some, but not many, readers who have not decided that Lady Dedlock is Esther's mother before this point because the clues are so plentiful, especially in Chapters Twelve and Eighteen. But it cannot be said that, at any particular point, the *reader* is intended to make a correct deduction.

As early as Chapter Two, Dickens is busy with the problem of side-tracking our potential suspicions that Lady Dedlock is Esther's mother. This could not be done in more direct fashion than in the first view of

1 *Bleak House*, xxix, 409–10.

Lady Dedlock, as she gazes wistfully at a child from the window of her boudoir at Chesney Wold:

My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a keeper's lodge, and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been quite out of temper (ii, 9)

Lady Dedlock is seen here through no other perspective than that of the [many-voiced] narrator, whom we have no reason to dissociate from the *author*. So the assertion that she is childless is nothing less than a lie and, as such, far beyond the accepted rules for the development of a mystery.²

The first true clue is to be found at the beginning of Chapter Twelve. We have returned to Chesney Wold, where, after a shower, the sun has come out:³

It looks in at the windows, and touches the ancestral portraits with bars and patches of brightness, never contemplated by the painters. Athwart the picture of my Lady, over the great chimney-piece, it throws a broad bend-sinister of light that strikes down crookedly into the hearth, and seems to rend it (xii, 153)

For many readers this clue will mean nothing, but some will be aware that a bend-sinister is a stripe running the wrong way on a coat-of-arms, and that it usually signifies illegitimacy. However, there is a much more obvious clue at a later point in the same chapter when Mrs Rouncewell discusses Lady Dedlock's lack of a family with her grandson, Watt:

"If she had had a daughter now, a grown young lady, to interest her, I think she would have had the only kind of excellence she wants" (xii, 157)

By this stage we know Esther quite well, and there are to be a number of readers who make the obvious connection. But it is futile to predict when the average reader will sort out this part of the mystery; individuals will solve it at many different points right up to the formal announcement.

For the reader who has not penetrated Lady Dedlock's secret, the passages which attempt to establish alternative lovers for her will remain meaningless. The earliest candidate is Boythorn in Chapter

2 See Champigny, *What Will Have Happened*, p. 29.

3 This type of clue is successful in respect of its insolubility for the first-time reader, but it is ineffective in that the text cannot plausibly refer back to it after the revelation.

Nine, exhibiting pronouncedly different attitudes to Sir Leicester and his wife. The former is a "stiff-necked, arrogant imbecile, pig-headed numskull" (ix 119), while "Lady Dedlock is the most accomplished lady in the world..." (ix, 120).

This exaggeration by itself would excite little attention except that Esther immediately detects "something so tender in his manner" (ix, 121) and suspects that he must once have been in love. John Jarndyce gives an equivocal answer to her question:

"You are right, little woman," he answered.
"He was all but married, once. Long ago. And once."
"Did the lady die?"
"No — but she died to him. That time has had its influence on all his later life" (ix, 121).

It is inevitable that many readers will make the paralogistic connection, but without a suspicion that any children came of such a relationship. In fact, little more is done to develop this promising red herring.

By Chapter Seventeen, many more will suspect that Lady Dedlock is Esther's mother, and Dickens judges that the time is right to create a suspicion that Jarndyce is himself the father. Esther asks her guardian what he knows of her origins and he says that he does not know who her parents were. He thanks her for the happiness which she has brought into his life:

"And oftener still," said I, "she blesses the Guardian who is a Father to her." At the word Father, I saw his former trouble come into his face. He subdued it as before and it was gone in an instant; but it had been there, and it had come so swiftly upon my words that I felt as if they had given him a shock.' (xvii, 237-38)

There is no need for Esther to say that she suspects that Jarndyce may turn out to be her father, because the reader with any experience of romantic fiction will already have jumped to that conclusion. It is indeed a subtle deception because there is the retrospective justification for this passage in the fact that Jarndyce wants to be thought of as lover rather than father. In the following chapter, our suspicions are apparently confirmed when we hear that Jarndyce had known Lady Dedlock in his younger days when they were both abroad (xviii, 255-56).

But there are a much larger number of clues which link Lady Dedlock to the mysterious Captain Hawdon ("Nemo"), and it is perhaps rather easier to guess than the text intends. Dickens's major problem is that the actions of all the investigative characters are dependent on a suspicion not only that Lady Dedlock is Esther's mother but also that Hawdon is her father. Without such a suspicion, they cannot proceed

at all. Whereas, in a murder mystery, no justification is required for the instigation of an investigation, this is not true of a mysterious birth.

In their various different ways, Guppy, Tulkinghorn, Bucket, and Grandpa Smallweed are attempting to gather evidence to support hypotheses which happen to be correct. Without the correct hypotheses, there would be no reason for them to investigate at all, yet the text does not intend that the *reader* should form the same hypothesis, otherwise the maintenance of the secret becomes pointless.⁴

But it is difficult to construct a pseudo-plot which will provide an alternative explanation for the activities of all these would-be detectives. So, as in *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens has to resort to tactics of obfuscation, creating a level of context inadequacy with which the Victorian reader, used to a much more straightforward narrative, would not have been happy. A typical example of the context inadequacy which the plot structure has made inevitable is that generated by Chapter Twenty, as Guppy tries to persuade his friend, Tony Jobling, to take lodgings in the rooms vacated by the late Nemo at Krook's. In retrospect, we can see that Guppy is trying to gain access to Krook's papers in order to prove his theory that Nemo is Esther's father.

The text does at least make a gallant attempt to provide an alternative explanation for Guppy's strange request. Guppy tries to explain his idea in the following roundabout fashion:

"I have seen something of the profession, and something of life, Tony," says Mr Guppy, "and it's seldom I can't make a man out, more or less. But such an old card as this; so deep, so sly, and secret (though I don't believe he is ever sober), I never came across. Now, he must be precious old, you know, and he has not a soul about him, and he is reported to be immensely rich; and whether he is a smuggler or receiver, or an unlicensed pawnbroker, or a money-lender — all of which I have thought likely at different times — it might pay you to knock up a sort of knowledge of him" (xx, 280).

This is not especially convincing, but it is at least better than *Barnaby Rudge*. As in so many of the other chapters in *Bleak House*, the reader is conscious that there is some kind of mystery, or series of mysteries, of which he is not fully aware. He does not know, for example, where George fits into the story or what Tulkinghorn is trying to do.⁵

4 Edgar Allan Poe makes this point, "Dickens's 'Barnaby Rudge'", p. 52. Also, see pp. 227–28, below.

5 The problem of Tulkinghorn's presentation is comparable to that of Banquo in *Macbeth* (ed. Kenneth Muir; London: Methuen, 1962; 9th 3d.). In both cases, a character is aware of another's guilty secret and aware that the other knows they know, yet the progress of the plot depends on their failure to act on this knowledge.

To create such a high level of retrospective suspense and context inadequacy, the text is forced to sacrifice many of the pleasures which are found in abundance in Dickens's earlier texts. As we have suggested, successful sitcom requires the placing of the *reader* in a situation of comparative omniscience, and many of the characters in *Bleak House* seem to have been invented with sitcom in mind.

All the characters in the scene just considered, Guppy, Jobling, and Young Smallweed, are potentially comic, and this scene might have been highly amusing if the *reader* had been in a position of knowledge. But, unless he has divined the discovered birth mystery, the reader will be unable to perceive the ironic gap between what Guppy says and his true intentions, and he will have no idea why Smallweed is included in the scene at all. Guppy only becomes genuinely funny in the scenes with Esther herself, and this is largely because the *reader* understands the feelings of each.

The usual Dickensian gallery of eccentrics is wasted in a mystery structure where they cannot be fully known. Boythorn and Trooper George, for example, seem distanced from the reader because of their functions within their separate mystery structures. John Jarndyce is forced to perform a role not only as potential father to Esther, but also as potential husband in the Austenian romance structure, and in both cases he turns out to be a red herring. The inevitable consequence is that the reader becomes uncertain how he should be responding to these comparatively straightforward characters.

The tendency of mystery to alienate reader from characters would have been increased still further if the murder mystery had been more effectively managed. As it is, there is hardly a sufficient number of suspects, and attendant pseudo-plots, to qualify this as a murder mystery in the tradition of Doyle and Christie. As long as the reader understands that there is a mystery at all,⁶ and that the obvious suspect is therefore unlikely to be guilty, he is almost bound to reach the conclusion that Hortense will be shown to have committed the crime. Most of the original readership would, of course, have presumed that Lady Dedlock committed the crime, and would have received a shock when Bucket finally reveals the guilty party.

The major weakness of the revelation is that it revises so little of our understanding of the preceding text. The whole machinery of alibi and interrogation is bypassed by the text. It is only *after* Bucket has made his announcement that we learn of Hortense's alibi on the night of the

6 On a first reading of *Bleak House*, I made the paralogistic assumption that Lady Dedlock had murdered Tulkinghorn, and considered that it was only a matter of time before she was revealed as a murderess and tragedy ensued. Rather than finding this the most mysterious part of the text, I at last presumed that I knew what was happening.

crime. The reader is not given a fair chance to compete with the detective in solving the crime. Bucket's success is hardly a triumph of deduction, rather it is the result of persuading his wife to spy on their lodger, Hortense as she writes an anonymous letter to Bucket, a scene which is not described to the *reader* at all. The reader can only solve the mystery by a generic awareness that Lady Dedlock is unlikely to have committed the crime and Hortense is the only other character with an established motive.⁷

We can hardly blame Dickens for not discovering the full aesthetic possibilities of the detective story at such an early date. There is, in fact, much to admire in the means by which he persuades many unsuspecting readers to presume that Lady Dedlock has committed the crime. Bucket's foolish arrest of George,⁸ who we know is innocent, suggests that the solution is not likely to emanate from his deductive faculties. Better still, Dickens does not make the mistake of allowing any prematurely stated suspicions that Lady Dedlock is guilty. For instance, when Esther first hears of Tulkinghorn's murder, her thoughts turn immediately to her mother, but with no hint of suspicion:

This unforeseen and violent removal of one whom she had long watched and distrusted, and who had long watched and distrusted her; one for whom she could have had few intervals of kindness, always dreading in him a dangerous and secret enemy, appeared so awful, that my first thoughts were of her. How appalling to hear of such a death, and be able to feel no pity! How dreadful to remember, perhaps, that she had sometimes even wished the old man away, who was so swiftly hurried out of life! (lii, 701)

The reader naturally discovers a large irony in Esther's apparent naïveté and trusting feelings towards her mother, yet it is the reader who is proved wrong eventually as the potential irony is subverted.

At this stage, most readers will feel prospective, rather than retrospective, suspense, wondering whether Lady Dedlock will escape the consequences of her crime, and, assuming she does not, what the effects will be, not only for My Lady, but for the rest of the Dedlock household. By this clever strategy, the mystery structure does not inflict damage, as is often the case, on another of the important forms in Dickens's generic combination, that of Lady Dedlock's tragedy. The *reader's* perspective on tragedy will be considered in more detail in Chapter Seven, but we will note here that it is important that the *reader* should feel a sense of prospective destiny, anticipating the catastrophe in advance. Our anticipation of Lady Dedlock's tragedy is certainly

7 See Hortense's furious argument with Tulkinghorn, xlii, 589.

8 This is reported at lii, 701.

increased by our inevitable, but unfounded, suspicion that she has murdered Tulkinghorn.

(v) Other Mysteries of the Fifties

Dickens attempted to repeat the feat a year later in *Hard Times for These Times*. All the genres included in this short work suffer from the brevity of their exposition and the violence of their juxtaposition, but this is particularly noticeable in the presentation of Stephen Blackpool. Not only is he forced to contribute to the extra-novelistic purpose of an indictment of union activity, but he is also the protagonist of both mystery and tragedy. The mystery, so similar to that of *Silas Marner*, published a few years later, concerns the whereabouts of Blackpool after he has left Coketown (II, vi, 165). At this point, his tragedy is developing in reasonably convincing fashion, since our sympathy has been won for him and we can see a variety of causes gradually contributing to his decline. But this structure has to be suspended while the mystery is established.

In order to construct a mystery out of so simple a question as his whereabouts, it is necessary that Blackpool should be abandoned for a full hundred pages, until he is at last discovered in Old Hell Shaft by Sissy and Rachael (III, vi, 267). In order to recover any element of pathos in his death, it is necessary that Stephen should not yet be dead, even though the fall into the pit must prove to be the cause of death. Thus a few pages are devoted to the attempt to recreate a sense of tragedy, but at a high cost to plausibility. In the circumstances, one is inclined to prefer Conrad's handling of a very similar situation in *Nostromo*. Here the fate of Decoud excites a similar retrospective suspense as he is abandoned on the Great Isabel, but Conrad is still able to describe his death in plausible detail by the simple expedient of a narrative analepse.¹

This has the advantage that it must be the *author* himself who reveals the solution to the mystery, and that it is difficult for the text to offer a convincing excuse for the failure to tell us what has become of Decoud at a much earlier point. But departures from linear chronological order were still less acceptable fifty years earlier, and Dickens found it almost impossible to complete the structures of both tragedy and mystery without compromising the text's credibility.

The only other significant mystery in *Hard Times* is the function within the narrative of the enigmatic Mrs Pegler, eventually revealed to be the mother of Bounderby. The reader knows that characters who are not given an initial function within the plot will inevitably be knitted into the closely-knit fabric of the whole. Without an assumption that latent connections will eventually be revealed, in *Bleak House* for example, the

1 An *analepsis* is "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 40).

reader's experience of suspense in reading Dickens would be very different. Such an assumption enables us to hypothesise possible connections, and to postulate tentative family relationships. *Little Dorrit* exploits such expectations in the presentation of Rigaud-Blandois-Lagnier, but also reverses the process in its eventual annulment of one apparent family relationship, that of Mrs Clennam and Arthur.

There is certainly evidence to suggest that Dickens lost interest in the meticulous presentation of mystery when writing *Little Dorrit* if that work is compared with the novels that precede and follow it.² Undoubtedly, one can say that the mystery plot of this text is not well chosen because it does not allow much development or false structuration. Most of the major characters are affected, at least theoretically, by one or other of the secrets diligently preserved by Mrs Clennam. The two secrets are that Arthur is the child of another woman and that Amy Dorrit, by a devious route, should have inherited two thousand guineas. The secrets are also known by the villainous Rigaud, who attempts to blackmail Mrs Clennam and is fortuitously buried alive while awaiting the result.

Here the resolution of the discovered birth mystery matters less than in *Bleak House* because neither of Arthur's true parents is written into the text. It is therefore extremely difficult to provide clues as to the true state of affairs or a satisfyingly retroactive anagnorisis. Similar problems of exposition are inherent in mysteries instituted by the concealment of a will or its codicil, and the revelation that Little Dorrit ought to have inherited considerable wealth does not seem to be determined by the preceding text. The connection eventually established between the deceased, Gilbert Clennam, whom we never meet, and Little Dorrit seems so arbitrary and nominal that we can hardly take an interest in the distribution of his equally arbitrary fortune. The revelations might be justified if they themselves acted as contributory causes in other plot sequences, or in the development of character, but nothing is in fact changed. There is time after the revelations only for a brief account of the inevitable nuptials of Arthur and Amy.

The weaknesses of the basic mystery structure may be seen in the awkwardness of the presentation of Rigaud, for whom Dickens makes no effort to construct any kind of pseudo-plot. At the end, we do not see Rigaud's actions in a new light because no alternative explanation has been offered for his conduct. He has no need to discover the narrative secrets for himself, in the narrative present, and his part, effectively, is only to tell Mrs Clennam that he intends to blackmail her.

2 Douglas Hewitt, for example, observes that: "The plot – in so far as it can be said to exist – is not merely implausible; it is surely deliberately perfunctory." *The Approach to Fiction: Good and Bad Readings of Novels* (London: Longman, 1972), p. 89.

Everything else that he does is decoration and an embarrassment to the developing domestic drama, for instance when he follows the Dorrit party on its tour of France and Italy. After the threats issued in Marseille, we suspect that Rigaud has some villainous plot in store but we have no means of discovering what it is.

While it is difficult to account for the failure of the mystery element in *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, on the other hand, has been hailed as containing Dickens's most successful plot,³ and several mysteries may be said to make up the larger part of that plot. But too much of the mystification results from an incomplete presentation of the narrative present, unjustified by the ignorance of any focal character within the text. For instance, Book Two, Chapter Nine describes a rendezvous of Charles St. Evremonde-Darnay with his father, the Marquis St. Evremonde. They are the only two characters in the scene and they are well aware of the identity of each other, but the text gives no overt indication of who is talking to whom or where they fit into the overall narrative scheme. There are a number of clues that the younger character is the Darnay that we already know, so that a number of readers will interpret the scene with a fair degree of confidence, but many others will fail to understand what is happening.

Dickens is not therefore fully in control of his mystification and the type of suspense which he is creating, and this is true of a number of scenes throughout *A Tale of Two Cities*. An unusually high proportion of the characters are "closed" to the *reader* for no other purpose than to create a mild surprise at some later point in the text. Sometimes this tactic can be quite effective, for instance in the mystery about what it is that Jerry Cruncher does during the night which results in clay on the soles of his shoes and rust on his hands.⁴ Here, at least, it is possible to provide clues which the reader can remember afterwards, and which create the possibility of the reader solving the mystery for himself.

The central mystery offers very few opportunities for the astute reader. The reasons for the sympathetic Dr Manette's antipathy towards the equally sympathetic Darnay can hardly be guessed by the first-time reader. More important than the eventual anagnorisis is the peripeteia to which it contributes, as Darnay is rearrested by Defarge because of the additional evidence against his family contained in the testimony of Dr Manette, found when Defarge and his fellow men ransacked the Bastille. This is a typically Hardyian plot-twist in that the action of one good man inadvertently contributes to the problems and potential tragedy of another.⁵ But Darnay escapes what seems to be the

3 See, e.g., Sir John Shuckburgh's Introduction to O.U.P. editions of *A Tale of Two Cities* (p. v).

4 The enigma is established in specific fashion for the reader, *A Tale of Two Cities*, II, i, 52, 54.

5 See below, p. 261 ff.

inevitable fate of St. Evremonde, and Sydney Carton goes to the guillotine instead, thanks to a physical resemblance which the text has established at an early stage.⁶ The risk is that this introduces too large an element of chance into the causal sequence, but Carton's tragedy has been well-prepared from an early point,⁷ and his resemblance to Darnay provides a convenient trigger for the completion of that structure.

The plot of *A Tale of Two Cities* is far from a complete success because the secrets to be concealed from the *reader* are not secrets to some of the important characters in the narrative. We cannot be permitted to know anything of the thoughts of Darnay and Dr Manette without the risk of a considerable implausibility when their secrets are eventually revealed. This makes it far more difficult for the text to arouse our sympathy and involvement in their situations.⁸ There are no such limitations on our involvement in Carton's story, so he is the centre of consciousness at some points, but, in general, the lack of focal characters makes the action seem distant and remote. There is the occasional sitcom situation, notably when Stryver and Carton compete for the affections of Lucie Manette, but, for the most part, the creation of mystery prevents the introduction of much humour.

From *Pickwick Papers* to *A Tale of Two Cities*, therefore, it is possible to trace a declining interest in those genres which allow the reader a full knowledge of characters and situations towards those (mystery and Austenian romance) which posit a *reader* who knows less than many of the characters. In many cases, the development of the mystery tends to limit our knowledge of, and therefore sympathy for, some of the most important characters, although this is not an inevitable consequence of the form. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens was able to create a mystery, or series of mysteries, which does not necessitate any artificial restriction on our knowledge of the most important character. Thus, it could be argued that the effect of increasing alienation and coldness, perceived by many readers, as Dickens's career develops, is no more than a reflection of the imperfections in the mystery plots which Dickens had constructed.

I would be reluctant to link the choice of genre itself to a change in the author's own psychological makeup, but the withdrawal of author (and therefore reader) from the mind and hearts of his actors has been noted on various stylistic levels.⁹ It is sufficient to conclude that Dickens had

6 *A Tale of Two Cities*, II, iii, 69.

7 It is true, however, that Carton is made to play a part in a number of conflicting generic structures. Notably, the competition between Carton and Stryver for the affections of Lucie Manette has all the hallmarks of sitcom.

8 See pp. 80–81.

9 Particularly interesting in this respect is Mark Lambert's *Dickens and the Suspended Quotation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), which considers the various styles in the presentation of characters' speeches in the course of Dickens's career. Lambert's

made great progress in the arts of mystery since the writing of *Barnaby Rudge*. The fruits of that long apprenticeship are to be seen in Dickens's last two completed novels, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, and it is the sophisticated technique revealed by these two novels which forms the subject of the next chapter.

statistical analysis indicates that Dickens became increasingly unwilling to offer an authorial perspective on those speeches.

Dickens, the Master of Mystery

(i) Wilkie Collins and Ambrose Bierce: Two Models of Retrospective Suspense

In considering the fiction of the late nineteenth century, it is valuable to distinguish two different types of mystery. These two varieties are best exemplified by the writings of Wilkie Collins and Ambrose Bierce. Bierce, although less successful than Collins, constructed a type of mystery which is more closely related to the mysteries of the twentieth century than anything that Collins produced. Bierce's tales work towards one strongly retroactive anagnorisis which occurs as close to the end of the narrative as possible.¹ Every detail in the narrative (beyond the most basic requirements of verisimilitude) is designed either to have some function in the transformed plot, or to act as a red herring or smoke-screen. The *reader* sees the true situation in a brief flash of understanding and, ideally, he gains no glimpse of that reorganisation of his understanding until it actually occurs.

The paradigm is Bierce's most famous story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", in which the reader follows the fortunes of one Peyton Farquhar who has been captured, and sentenced to death, by the advancing Federal army in the Civil War.² Farquhar is to be hanged underneath Owl Creek Bridge but, fortuitously, it appears that the rope snaps at the crucial moment and he falls in the water, and is thus enabled to make a dramatic escape.³ Here we seem to have the typical adventure situation, one sympathetic hero,⁴ living on his wits, and a host of adversaries who would kill him if they could catch him. Farquhar's escape fares well but, at the moment when he apparently gets back to his cottage and wife, seemingly out of danger, he loses consciousness, and the text springs its last-line surprise:

As he is about to clasp her, he feels a stunning blow upon the back of the neck; a blinding white light blazes all about him with a sound like the shock of a cannon — then all is darkness and silence!

1 Ambrose Bierce, *In the Midst of Life: Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* (New York: Signet, 1961; 1st pub. 1891).

2 "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", pp. 16–26.

3 Bierce, pp. 21 ff.

4 Farquhar had a "kindly expression ... Evidently this was no vulgar assassin" (p. 17).

Peyton Farquhar was dead; his body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge (p. 39).

Our perspective on almost every detail in the preceding narrative is radically altered by this last sentence of the story, and we see how many clues we had missed that Farquhar's escape was no more than an instantaneous fantasy which lasted as long as his descent from the bridge to the end of the rope. The alternation in the sense of time, the surreal details of his fantasy, and the increasing pain in his neck, have all been clearly indicated, but we have been persuaded to misinterpret these pieces of information as elements in the adventure of Farquhar's escape.⁵

Finally, we see that Farquhar was never the free protagonist of his own adventure but the puppet on a string of his captors (and author) who have predicted and controlled his every move. Some readers may see this in advance, but this is no part of the anticipated reading experience which is geared to the presumption that we fail to guess, and if we *do* guess too early we will lose much of our pleasure in reading. It is a fragile mechanism. If the reader correctly interprets any one element in the pseudo-plot (e.g., the increasing pain in Farquhar's neck), he may glimpse the causal sequence of which it is a part, especially if that sequence is such that it can be revealed in a one-line solution.

So the pseudo-plot of the adventure which becomes a mystery must itself be self-contained and perfectly plausible, without an unlikely line which will alert the reader to a true interpretation. Plot is therefore all-important, and the writer of mystery must discover a narrative or a linguistic trick with which the reader is not familiar. The possibility, in *Barnaby Rudge*, that a corpse may be wrongly identified is one such trick, but the narrative falls to pieces if the reader is awake to the possibility of the particular trick that is being played.

Wilkie Collins's mysteries are not balanced on a knife-edge in quite the same way. Typically, as in *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, there are a number of narrative secrets that are not so tightly bound to each other that the discovery of one inevitably leads to an understanding of the complete narrative sequence.

At first, such a narrative seems to offer distinct advantages in that the *reader* may experience several anagnorises and thus may anticipate an important revelation at any moment, instead of being committed, as in the detective novel of today, to waiting until the end for any part of the solution. But, if the anagnorisis does not give the *reader* an understanding of the complete sequence that he has witnessed, it is

5 During his escape underwater, the Federal Army shoots at Farquhar and one of the bullets, slowed by the water, "Lodged between his collar and neck; it was uncomfortably warm, and he snatched it out" (p. 23).

often a poor anagnorisis. Such revelations do not give the reader the sudden sense of knowledge and power which is the *raison d'être* of the form. Furthermore, the final anagnorisis, if it does no more than uncover the last link, does not provide the resounding closure or sense of all-transforming enlightenment which is the attraction of the Biercian mystery.

But the “gradual-revelation” type of mystery remains workable.⁶ If the plot is clever enough, it can create an intermediate anagnorisis which *does* seem to transform and explain every element of the narrative so far, but which, in fact, either generates a new mystery, or fails, in some unforeseen way, to explain all of the preceding narrative. In *Rebecca*, for example,⁷ the revelation that Max murdered Rebecca seems to explain all that was problematic in the narrative so far but, in the end, it is no more than a prelude to the discovery that Rebecca, near death anyway, had planned the whole thing in order to drag Max down with her. While they relate to the same central event, the sequence is not connected in such a way that the discovery of the first secret inevitably leads to the discovery of the second.

Similarly, in *The Woman in White*, our realisation that Sir Percival Glyde is a heartless villain does not enable us to understand that he and Count Fosco have conspired to feign Laura's death in order to gain her fortune.⁸ Nor does the discovery of the latter help us to penetrate the basic secret of Sir Percival's birth.⁹ The plot of *The Woman in White* has many flaws,¹⁰ but it is reasonably well adapted to the tactics of gradual revelation. The same cannot be said for *The Moonstone*, which attempts to combine the revelation-by-stages with a straightforward murder-type mystery in which there is only one true secret.¹¹

The intermediate anagnorises in *The Moonstone* do not give the reader the feeling that he has solved the mystery of the disappearance of the diamond because they manifestly fail to explain every circumstance. The narrative approaches its core of mystery from both ends, offering

6 See pp. 240–46.

7 *Rebecca*, xix, 314. See, above, p. 23.

8 Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (London: Dent, 1910; 1st pub. 1859). The first clear indication that Sir Percival Glyde is a villain is to be found on p. 129.

9 This Secret (always capitalised) is uncovered on pp. 478–89, but it is not as important to our understanding of the rest of the narrative as the text would have us believe.

10 The basic mystery (that of Laura's “death”) requires the creation of two characters (Glyde and Fosco) who are not prepared to kill Laura to achieve their ends, but conceive a far-fetched and dangerous scheme in which they must kidnap another woman from a lunatic asylum, allow her (as luck would have it) to die, and substitute Laura in her place in the asylum, with the assumption that no-one there will recognise the difference. Furthermore, the *reader* is asked to believe that all the evidence that is collected together by Hartright would not be sufficient to convict Glyde and Fosco, even though it convinces us.

11 Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London: Folio Soc., 1951; 1st pub. 1868).

equivocal indications that Rachel and Rosanna Spearman are shielding Franklin Blake even though they know that he has committed the crime, and that Godfrey Ablewhite now has the diamond in London. The problem is that, if we know both of these things are true, which they are, we must presume either that the two men are in league together, or that Ablewhite stole the diamond from Blake after the original theft, as is in fact the case. Since that is no twist at all, the conclusion does not provide much of an anagnorisis if the other facts are known.

Consequently, the text fudges the two earlier anagnorises so that it is by no means certain or clear that anything at all has been established. Even after Rachel tells Blake that she saw him steal the diamond,¹² we are encouraged to assume that trick has been played, since Blake protests his innocence so convincingly. Every modern reader, at least, would be alert to the possibility of disguise. We can see that it would have been possible to impersonate Blake in the dark and to plant incriminating evidence afterwards.

Similarly, when it is implied that Ablewhite has deposited some valuable gem in London, we are given no proof that it is the moonstone and, since we can see that there is a large part of the narrative still to be read,¹³ we assume that this is a red herring too. In short, we are encouraged to suspect paralogisms where none have been perpetrated, and the text leaves itself ample opportunity to dismiss these apparent revelations as false leads and to incriminate some third party. When it finally fails to do so, the reader is likely to feel let down by the lack of transformation. Nevertheless, in the obfuscation of the earlier anagnorises to strengthen the impact of the final clarification, we can see that *The Moonstone* is closer to the Biercian mystery than it cares to admit.¹⁴

Another aspect of Collins's technique which departs from the norms of twentieth-century Biercian construction is the use of multiple first-person narration. Nearly all Collins's novels employ a series of narrators who take the story gradually forward to its solution. Collins himself suggested that this tactic was adopted for purposes of verisimilitude, it is recorded,¹⁵ while other critics, following the example

12 *The Moonstone*, p. 305.

13 Ablewhite's action is suggested by the announcement that the Indians had stolen one of Luker's papers which "acknowledged the receipt of a valuable of great price" (p. 180).

14 It would have been possible, for example, to have retained every element of the narrative secret until the final anagnorisis, in the Biercian fashion, but *The Moonstone* is too long to retain interest in so simple a mystery without an intermediate elucidation.

15 Although he gives no reference, Robert Ashley records that Collins said the purpose of I-narration "was to achieve the effect and create the illusion of evidence presented by witnesses at a trial." Robert Ashley, *Wilkie Collins* (London: Arthur Baker, 1958), p. 68.

of commentators on Richardson,¹⁶ have assumed that the major advantage was the possibility of using narrators who had no idea how the story was going to end and thus could suggest misleading perspectives. There is a grain of truth in the latter explanation, as Collins exploits some narrators' non-omniscience for deceptive purposes, also the fact that the reader cannot tell at what point in time the narrator is writing. Mr Gilmore, for example, needs to make no apology for his praises of Sir Percival Glyde because, as we later discover, he does not know the end of the story.¹⁷ But this in itself is a little clumsy, and problems of plausibility are created in the collection of narratives from those who are involved in a life-and-death situation if every narrative is self-evidently designed to keep the *reader* in a state of ignorance.

In fact, repeated I-narration can be awkward and unwieldy compared with a flexible third-person narration because the I-narrator (who must eventually be tied down to a specific time and place) can only offer one perspective and set of thoughts, which must themselves be internally consistent. Third-person narration, on the other hand, may, and usually does, move repeatedly and imperceptibly from one mind to another so that, as in the Austenian romance, at any given moment, it is difficult to assess the reliability of narrative propositions. The history of the hermeneutic mystery suggests that it is considerably easier to control the reader's expectations (especially wrong expectations) through a de-authorised third-person narration.

Dickens was, of course, well aware of the success of *The Woman in White* in *All the Year Round*, and it is perhaps not surprising that his next novel, *Great Expectations*, incorporates large elements of mystery within a single first-person narration. In *Great Expectations*, the I-narration achieves far more than the perpetuation of a narrative mystery, but it is that which will be mainly considered here.

16 e.g., James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, p. 567 (see p. 56, above).

17 Gilmore is conveniently sent abroad, as we later discover, on account of his illness, just as Mr Candy disappears in *The Moonstone*.

(ii) Pip's Great Deception

To make I-narration worthwhile, as David Goldknopf has pointed out,¹ there must be what he calls the “confessional increment”, a quality which is found in greater abundance in Dickens's texts than in anything by Collins. In Collins's texts, the narrator's view of the world does not seem to be important for its own sake. We become interested in Pip on a personal level before we know that there is any mystery to be solved, and we learn to see the world through Pip's eyes as though they were our own. Even after the main anagnorisis, which turns adventure to mystery as we discover the true origins of Pip's fortune, we are not inclined to blame the narrator for deceiving us. Pip has done no more, it seems, than allow us to make the same mistake that he himself has made, and we, unlike Pip, are never chastised for that mistake.

In *Great Expectations*, at last, we can see a clear distinction between the pseudo-plot and the transformed plot without feeling that either sequence is improbable or unjustified. Pip's basic misconception about the origin of his fortune is perhaps the soundest organising principle behind any of Dickens's mysteries. All but the shrewdest of readers will accept Pip's assumption that Miss Havisham is the fairy godmother who has turned him into a rich young man since there are no apparent alternative donors.

Even if we remember the fearsome convict of the first chapters, we are unlikely to associate him either with wealth or the desire to dispose it on Pip. Most readers will remember only the terrible, unpredictable Magwitch who had threatened to eat Pip's fat cheeks (i, 2), fears which we have been persuaded to share. By the time Magwitch is recaptured (v, 32), there are a number of indications that he is not as bad as he seemed at first, for instance his “confession” that he stole from the blacksmith's. But, for most readers, these clues will only surface retrospectively when they act as sufficient justification for his benevolence.

It is possible that Dickens provides more clues than necessary, notably in the scenes at the “Three Jolly Bargemen” where Pip is given two pounds by a strange man,² and, later, during the stagecoach ride.³ But both of these are set a considerable distance from the announcement that Pip is to be looked after financially and taken under the wing of Mr

1 David Goldknopf, *The Life of the Novel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), Chapter Two.

2 *Great Expectations*, x, 72.

3 *Great Expectations*, xxviii, 216–17.

Jaggers, Miss Havisham's lawyer. In developing the impressive parallogism, it is important, not simply that we know that Miss Havisham's lawyer is Jaggers, but that we (along with Pip) have discovered the fact for ourselves. Pip first encounters Jaggers when he visits Miss Havisham's for the second time. In this episode the *reader* is bombarded with individuals whom he cannot "place" in the developing narrative scheme. A burly, disagreeable man talks to the bewildered Pip:

He was nothing to me, and I could have had no foresight then, that he ever would be anything to me, but it happened that I had this opportunity of observing him well (xi, 77).

This is a straightforward example of *underlining* the false lead and, because of this proleptic glimpse, we are alerted to the fact, even before he is identified, that Jaggers will play an important part in the fable.

Pip and the still-unnamed Jaggers meet again in the "Three Jolly Bargemen", when the powerful lawyer argues with Wopsle (xviii, 126-28), but Pip has to dig deep in his memory to recall that this is the man that he met at Miss Havisham's. Thus, when Jaggers comes to introduce himself, and reveals Pip's new prosperity, we presume that we, like Pip, are in possession of a piece of information which has luckily fallen into our hands. It is very unlikely that we will foresee that it is no more than a coincidence that Jaggers is lawyer to Miss Havisham or that he might also be the lawyer of Magwitch.

The character of Miss Havisham is drawn in such a way that her subsequent actions are intelligible both in the pseudo-plot and, eventually, in the transformed plot. A careful use of ambiguous attribution is enough to establish and reinforce the misconception, for instance when Pip first hears the news:

My dream was out; my wild fancy was surpassed by sober reality; Miss Havisham was going to make my fortune on a grand scale (xviii, 130).

With hindsight, we may say that an operator has been omitted here. The passage ought to read: "it seemed to me at the time that my wild fancy had been surpassed by sober reality." But such an omission is legitimate because almost all perfect-tense I-narration might be prefaced by such an operator.

Indeed, it is taken for granted. However, the juxtaposition of "wild fancy" and "sober reality" ensures that we forget that this is Pip's inference rather than fact.

Miss Havisham has no desire to dispel Pip's illusion when he tells her that he is off to London:

“This is a gay figure, Pip,” said she, making her crutch stick play round me, as if she, the fairy godmother who had changed me, were bestowing the finishing gift (xix, 149)

Ethically, this construction is more questionable than the above because the syntax is insufficiently ambiguous. We understand the subordinate clause (“the fairy godmother who had changed me”) as defining the subject, rather than as being itself modified by the operator (“as if”) which, apparently only refers to the last five words of the sentence. Yet there is still an implicit justification that the whole text is contained within an implied “it seemed to me as if” superstructure. This is one advantage of I-narration which is often overlooked, but we shall see that, in *Our Mutual Friend*, precisely the same ambiguities can be exploited in third-person narration through techniques of *displaced I-narration*.⁴

If the *reader* is to be deceived by a character, it is far more likely that the deception can be maintained if the character intends to deceive others. Greater verbal dexterity would have been required if Miss Havisham had been innocent of deception.⁵ Such a deception fits comfortably into both the true and false causal schemes, and the text maintains the double-plot without strain.

But there may still be questions at the back of the reader’s mind. If Miss Havisham is intent on being revenged on the male sex in general, why should she be so generous to Pip and so anxious, as he presumes, to establish him in Estella’s affection? Herbert emphasises this point to Pip (xxii, 166), and also offers apparent support to the assumption that Jaggers is working for Miss Havisham. “You know he is Miss Havisham’s man of business and solicitor, and has her confidence when nobody else has?” Herbert asks.

There are good reasons for hypothesising that such additional proofs are ill-judged once the inference that Miss Havisham is Pip’s benefactor has been established in the *reader’s* mind. The shrewd reader may well wonder why the text should still find it necessary to prove a point which before had seemed self-evident.

In traditional rhetoric, the *ceratin* is an argument which is so couched that, seemingly, all possibilities equally prove it true.⁶ In the hermeneutic mystery, the *ceratin* must always be handled with care as

4 See p. 28.

5 When Pip offers his thanks to her, Miss Havisham looks at “the discomfited and envious Sarah, with delight” (xix, 149). Miss Havisham asks Pip many questions and gloats on the answers, “so keen was her enjoyment of Sarah Pocket’s jealous dismay” (p. 149). It is therefore clear that she is aware of Pip’s misunderstanding.

6 See Richard A. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968). A *ceratin* is an argument so couched that, seemingly, all possibilities equally prove it true (or false) (p. 22).

the more unequivocally a proposition is “proved”, the less the reader is likely to believe it. If, at the beginning of a detective novel, a certain suspect seems to be unquestionably guilty, the reader will inevitably look elsewhere, secure in the assumption that there will be a loop-hole in the unquestionable proof. As soon as a proposition reaches the surface of textual rhetoric in a mystery (like the hero of the Austenian romance), the reader ought to become sceptical. The experienced reader knows that no fictional locked room is without some kind of exit.⁷

Thus we may well begin to remember that Pip's inference is no more than an inference *because* proof is added to proof. At this stage in the text, it is becoming easier to suspect a split between the judgements of the older and younger Pips, and to detect certain possible ironies. For instance, when Pip visits the disdainful Estella and Miss Havisham on a trip home from London, we are given a clear indication that we are following the thoughts of the younger Pip. Miss Havisham “had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together” (xxix, 219). Here the logic is clearly not supported by the narrative evidence and Pip himself has to admit (xxix, 222) that he is deluded by his love for Estella.

It is easy for the second-time reader to forget that the distinction in perspectives between the two Pips is not transparently obvious, and that it was never meant to be. It is only at a comparatively late stage that the text provides any substantial evidence that any serious criticism is intended of the young Pip.⁸ As in most adventures which become mysteries at a late stage, the implied *reader* of the text is by no means an objective and rational judge, capable of detecting all the ironies of a text. Dickens's *reader's* sympathy has been gained by the events of the first half of the narrative,⁹ and such failings as Pip shows may be marked down, not as black marks, but as human weaknesses which make him more, rather than less, sympathetic.

It has already been noted that *Great Expectations* reaches a surprising romantic conclusion, in that Pip is linked to the girl he has pursued all

7 The classic novel, characteristically, takes the (apparently) immutable details of life, the facts of birth, marriage, and death, and demonstrates that they are no more than the illusions of a particular narrative perspective. The “locked room puzzle” is a traditional element in the detective novel, as a character enters or leaves a room or house when this had not seemed possible.

8 We, like the narrator, sympathise entirely with young Pip as he is brought up “by hand” by his sister, as he is intimidated by Magwitch, Pumblechook, and others, as he fights the strange young boy, and so on. At every stage, the young Pip responds as we feel we would have done.

9 The narrator himself seems entirely reliable, describing his life with due modesty in measured prose, obeying all the tenets of autobiographical decorum. We detect no sign of an *author* asking us to make critical judgements.

along.¹⁰ In our consideration of mystery structure, it is interesting to note the similarity this conclusion bears to that of another of *Great Expectations*'s enigmas, that of the identity of Mrs Joe's assailant. The reader's retrospective suspense is maintained until the very end when Orlick, the obvious suspect, at last admits that he is the culprit.¹¹ Since there is no surprise at the eventual revelation, our suspense has been, to a certain degree, redundant, or spurious.

It has been carefully established that Orlick has the right disposition, motive, and opportunity to inflict the injury that leads to Mrs Joe's death, and the young Pip clearly suspects him of the crime (xvi, 116). In real life, we might suspect him too on this evidence, but in fiction (at least, after the emergence of the detective novel) the opposite rules apply, and the true villain should emerge from elsewhere.

But the text hardly provides an alternative suspect, and the eventual admission that Orlick committed the crime, instead of enabling us to understand the preceding narrative, raises more questions than it answers. Why, for instance, did Mrs Joe behave after the attack as if Orlick had been a life-long friend?¹² Curiously, the murder mystery is the weakest part of *Great Expectations*, despite the advantages which murder has for the development of mystery.¹³

Although our perspective on Orlick is not changed in the way that we might expect it would be, it is still true that, of all Dickens's novels, *Great Expectations* generates the most character suspense of one type or another.¹⁴ Characters who appear evil or malevolent at one stage become sympathetic when seen in a different perspective or in the light of new information.

This is the antithesis of character construction in melodrama where heroes are heroes and villains are villains.¹⁵ Characters who undergo

10 Dickens's choice in this respect was presumably not premeditated, but resulted from the late advice of Bulwer Lytton. See Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 491.

11 *Great Expectations*, liii, 404, after a very brief pseudo-anagnorisis when Orlick accuses Pip of the crime.

12 *Great Expectations*, xvi, 117.

13 Champigny (*What Will Have Happened*, pp.41–56) discusses various possible reasons for the popularity of murder as a subject for mystery, but determines that, in the genre as a whole, "neither criminal nor detective is essential" (p. 14). Murder has several advantages over the discovered birth mystery, especially in that, in the latter, it is difficult to establish a motive for concealment or for the desire to investigate the mystery.

14 See pp. 96–103. In *Great Expectations*, most character suspense is retrospective, the object being to discover the true nature of each individual.

15 In the typical nineteenth-century melodrama, the audience knows precisely where each character stands and what he intends to do. A good example is Maria Martin, or *Murder in the Red Barn*, which may be found in *The Golden Age of Melodrama: Twelve 19th Century Melodramas*, ed. Michael Kilgarriff (London: Wolfe, 1974), pp. 203–35.

radical transformation in the *reader's* estimation include Magwitch, Miss Havisham, Estella, Mrs Joe, Herbert Pocket, Jaggers, Wemmick, and even Trabb's boy.

In general, our opinion of the character is improved in the course of the narrative. Sometimes the change in perspective is gradual and sometimes it is the result of a plot peripeteia, thus producing some degree of pleasurable anagnorisis. Such "realisations" may turn out to be incorrect and yet still play an important part in our experience of the text. The discovery, when Jaggers tells Pip of his inheritance, that Miss Havisham is not just the embittered eccentric we had taken her for, is as important a part of our response to this character as the later discovery that there is something in her pathetic situation which requires more than the scornful dismissal which we, like Pip, have been tempted to bestow on her.

By the time he wrote *Great Expectations*, character had become for Dickens not a finite building block but a hermeneutic mystery in its own right, for ever capable of the most radical modulation. Such propensity for change suggests an optimistic conception of human psychology. So many of Dickens's caterpillars become butterflies that the reader starts to believe that he can make the same transformation, and escape the role which society has imposed on him. Most of Dickens's character transformations are, however, not ones of essential nature, but of the reader's perspective. The nineteenth-century realist text is constructed for a *reader* who believes that character and action are consistent with each other. Within this assumption, transformational character presentation is as essential to mystery as a rigidly diachronic character presentation is essential to tragedy.

(iii) The Creation of Opportunities for Retrospective Suspense in *Our Mutual Friend*

In Dickens's last completed masterpiece, there is little genuine prospective suspense,¹ and the *reader's* primary concern is to understand the strange characters who parade before him in kaleidoscopic procession. We are forced to suspend judgement of most of the characters because each has his own little secrets and plots which are the key to his behaviour. Even when we feel that we understand a character, such as Rokesmith or Boffin, the text is likely to turn around and show us how mistaken we are. The text is no longer, like Mr Pickwick, a reassuring companion, but a hermeneutic assault course.

Dickens's latter-day preference for mystery structures may be easily observed in the presentation of Eugene's progress after he is attacked by Headstone. We presume that there are two basic alternatives; Eugene is either alive or dead, and there is no doubt about what the text intends us to expect: "there was another great crash, and then a splash, and all was done" (iv, vi, 698).

Here the text suggests as much finality as it dares, and we experience a powerful desire to have the matter resolved. Yet the text declines to remain at the scene of the crime, following Headstone and Riderhood instead.

Headstone is unsure of the success of his enterprise, so he recommences at school where he is visited by Charley Hexam (in whose eyes, Headstone is at last transformed), who announces, almost parenthetically, that Eugene is dead.² This revelation forces us to revise, at least subconsciously, our assumptions about Eugene's function in the novel, and our expectations from the narrative that is still to come, Lizzie's fate, etc. We have no way of knowing that the *fait accompli* is nothing of the sort, or that Charley is in no position to know the truth. These are dubious tactics in any case, but it is curious that the text offers no subsequent explanation of Charley's mistake, since such a pre-text would not have been difficult to invent. In fact, no space is found for this essential component of the mystery structure.

1 In reading the Boffin-Rokesmith-Wegg-Bella episodes, we presume that we understand the narrative situation and, therefore, feel considerable uncertainty about the narrative future. But that interest is based on a mistaken understanding of the narrative situation which is well under the control of Boffin and Rokesmith.

2 *Our Mutual Friend*, IV, vii, 710.

For twenty-five pages after the pseudo-anagnorisis provided by Charley, the text follows characters in whom our interest is by no means so overwhelming.³ Dickens's technique of shifting so frequently from one plot to another is perhaps more appropriate to the development than the conclusion of his many-sided narrative, and it is possible that the over-riding concern generated by the Headstone-Wrayburn plot is misjudged. Eventually, Mortimer arrives with a short note for Jenny informing her of the situation. "There was no time to make it longer. Time was so very precious. My dear friend, Mr Eugene Wrayburn, is dying." (IV, ix, 735).

In normal linguistic usage, the process of dying is not reversible, and is always succeeded, sooner rather than later, by death. We would not be suspicious if we had not been already told that Eugene was dead. We may wonder briefly whether we have missed a subtle chronological shift, so that we are witnessing a scene prior to the meeting of Headstone and Charley, but that possibility (unprecedented in the Dickensian canon) is quickly dispelled. At last, we are taken to Eugene's "death-bed" scene, where the much changed Eugene says that he knows there is no hope.⁴ In the absence of any medical details, we may begin to suspect that death is far from inevitable, especially when Eugene and Lizzie decide to get married immediately.⁵

At a surface level, the text postpones the peripeteia as long as possible, and achieves it by almost imperceptible degrees. Lizzie begs Eugene to live for her sake,⁶ and eventually Eugene employs an "if I live" clause (IV, xi, 754). But Eugene is no more than a "shade better" a long time afterwards (IV, xv, 792). It is only at the end of the penultimate chapter that he is daily growing stronger and "it was declared by the medical attendants that he might not be much disfigured by-and-bye" (IV, xvi, 811). Thus we are given the token (and, to the *reader*, intangible) disfigurement to appease those who look for verisimilitude in this conclusion.

In the Victorian novel, illness and injury are often exploited for their prospective suspense, their potential as adventure. In a sense, it is easy for the Victorian novelist; he simply announces that the hero(ine) is ill or at death's door, and the reader has to prepare himself for the imminent loss of his favourite character. Medical details were not

3 IV, viii switches to a much less serious scene involving Jenny Wren and Fledgeby, characters well removed from the narrative centre, while IV, ix concerns Jenny and Riah.

4 *Our Mutual Friend*, IV, x, 740.

5 The shrewd reader will guess that the author is unlikely to leave his heroine as a young widow at the imminent farewell of the text; this would be unprecedented in the Dickensian world.

6 *Our Mutual Friend*, IV, xi, 753.

required by the verisimilitude of the time. Having a character become ill can hardly be termed unrealistic, while recovery and death are equally plausible alternatives. Of these two possibilities, it is perhaps more difficult to justify the recovery of the character, since this arouses the suspicion that the illness was contrived for no other reason than to create a crisis.

In practice, illnesses in the more memorable of the Victorian novels are almost invariably tied into causal sequences fairly securely, as the direct or indirect result of specific actions or character traits. If the victim recovers, there are always clear signs of moral improvement that mirror the physical recovery. Eugene Wrayburn, for example, has risen a great deal in textual estimation by the time he recovers, to the point where we may consider him a worthy husband for Lizzie.⁷ Illness is an automatic source of increased sympathy, and Pip's illness at the end of *Great Expectations*, although only perfunctorily reported, helps to ensure the reader's indulgent response as he continues to yearn after Estella. But because Dickens turns Eugene's "death" into a mystery, a retrospective rather than a prospective suspense structure, we see comparatively little of Eugene himself, and it is not certain that our perspective on him as potential hero will be sufficiently transformed to create an acceptable Austenian romance conclusion.

The conclusion of the other primary plot of *Our Mutual Friend* is more representative of late Dickens because the element of chance and adventure is almost eliminated. All the apparent prospective suspense questions are made redundant by the startling revelation that the Boffins and Rokesmith have been playing carefully-designed parts all along.⁸ By revealing the true state of affairs, and transforming the seemingly straightforward adventure structure into a resolved mystery, the text gains all the intermediate advantages of prospective suspense without the necessity of an arbitrary solution, a coin tossed by an implicit *deus ex machina*, the author in disguise.

In the adventure, there must be a very fine balance between success and failure in order to maintain prospective suspense. There is always the possibility that things might just as easily have turned out the other way, that, for example, the cavalry might not have arrived in the nick of time. It seems likely that this arbitrary eventuation disappoints the

7 Similarly, Pip's illness at the end of *Great Expectations* helps to ensure the reader's indulgent response when he continues to yearn after Estella.

8 The major questions which the text persuades us to ask are: will Bella finally value the love that Rokesmith offers, or the wealth and materialism which Boffin represents? Has Boffin become too deeply corrupted to see the error of his ways? Will Wegg succeed in his intention to profit from the second will that he has found, and take Boffin's money away from him?

more critical reader.⁹ Certainly, it is easier for other genres to create the vital illusions of self-determination.

There are two basic solutions to the teleological dilemma which is faced by the writer of adventure. Firstly, he can import elements of mystery which, to some degree, allow the text to perform some kind of retroactive transformation, and to achieve the illusion of self-determination by that means. In *Great Expectations*, Pip faces certain and immediate death as he is cornered by the vengeful Orlick in an isolated sluice-house on the marshes. At the last moment, he is saved by the sudden, unexpected appearance of Herbert, Startop, and Trabb's boy. But the text emphasises the fact that this arrival is not pure chance and that it is plausibly dictated by certain narrative events that we have already witnessed. Pip, in his hurry, had left the unsigned letter fixing the rendezvous where Herbert might find it, and Herbert had been more suspicious about the identity of the sender than Pip had been.¹⁰ Thus he had followed Pip in a post-chaise and encountered Trabb's boy, who had happened to see Pip pass by and was willing to act as guide.

So we have a simple causal chain with clues already long since planted in the text. In the true adventure, each event has at least two possible continuations, often diametrically opposed (success or failure, death or glory). But most adventures perform variations on the above manoeuvre at critical junctures in order to rationalise the continuation which actually takes place. It is the fairy tale or fable which, in my terms, can, unlike the novel, be described as pure adventure.

The other major self-determination strategy of adventure is the historical justification, or, more often, the quasi-historical justification. In this gambit, the text emphasises repeatedly that these strange events really did happen, and are certainly not a figment of the author's vivid imagination. This relieves the author from the responsibility of awarding victory or defeat as well as adding a large measure of verisimilitude. Judging from the best-sellers lists, the reading public certainly prefers its adventures to carry a historical justification, while the stamp of reality is not so essential to the appeal and success of other genres.

Champigny's aesthetic preferences among detective novels are based on the depth and completeness of the final transformation,¹¹ and, by this standard, *Our Mutual Friend* would score highly indeed. The deception

9 It is true that very few genuine fictional adventures have received the highest critical accolades.

10 *Great Expectations*, lii, 397-98.

11 "I enjoy the bouquet of a denouement, but what matters above all is the "body", that is to say, the depth and comprehensiveness of the transformation" (*What Will Have Happened*, p. 39).

is achieved by exploiting a conventional assumption of most Victorian texts. It is traditionally expected that if a character is, for example, the subject of Chapter Twenty of a novel, and is next mentioned as the subject of Chapter Twenty-Five nothing *important* has been omitted from the presentation, even if, in terms of the narrative's own chronology, there are days or weeks in between the two scenes. Since Bella, Rokesmith, and the Boffins occupy the centre stage intermittently, it does not occur to us that anything may be omitted as the story unfolds.

If Rokesmith had been the centre of consciousness throughout *Our Mutual Friend*, we might regard it as an illegitimate tactic that happenings of long-term significance are omitted, and his very identity undisclosed. In fact, he is very rarely the centre of consciousness, and we learn very little of what is happening in his mind. This is the price that the text must pay to maintain the mystery, and Rokesmith cannot therefore be a hero in the way that Jude or Henchard are heroes. It is understandable that Rokesmith, like Darnay before him, should appear comparatively wooden according to criteria of characterisation dependent on the assumptions of psychological realism.

Who, therefore, are the centres of consciousness in *Our Mutual Friend*? It might surprise many first-time readers if they were told that much of what seems to be "straight" authorial presentation (such a thing is, in any case, extremely rare even in Dickens) is in fact the world seen through the eyes of Bella Wilfer. At least, that is the only explanation that will account for all aspects of the text's presentation. However, it is the text's intention that we should assume that we are gaining some insight into the minds of Boffin and Rokesmith as well as Bella. The crucial concealed event, the scene in which the Boffins recognise Rokesmith as John Harmon and hatch the plot to teach Bella (and the *reader*, of course) an important lesson, presumably occurs in the long gap between II, xiv and III, v, a gap in which none of these characters plays a part.

In II, xiv, Boffin is treating Rokesmith as an equal, while we are prepared for III, v by Bella's impression that Boffin is growing "suspicious, capricious, hard, tyrannical, unjust" (III, iv, 460). The text asks us to judge for ourselves, since Bella does not play an active part in the scenes of conflict between Rokesmith, in his role as Secretary, and Boffin. There are a number of reasons why we are unlikely to guess that their disagreements are a complete sham. Most importantly, their conduct throughout is quite plausible according to what we already know of their characters and situations. Rokesmith's conduct is consistent on three levels, not only from the perspective of the completed plot and from Bella's present perspective, but also from the point of view of the first-time reader who believes that he alone knows Rokesmith's true identity and plan to deceive Boffin.

This is the crucial point about this type of bluff; the *reader* believes that he is actually one step *ahead* of the situation, and sits back to enjoy the sitcom. Like Pip, we feel privileged that we have been granted more information than the actors themselves. Only afterwards do we discover that we are actually one step behind. The apparent change in Boffin's personality, meanwhile, is consistent with one of the most obvious and important themes in *Our Mutual Friend*, the corrupting effect of money on the individual and society, as the opening of III, v makes clear:

Were Bella Wilfer's bright and ready little wits at fault, or was the Golden Dustman passing through the furnace of proof and coming out dross? Ill news travels fast. We shall know full soon (III, v, 461).

In fact, we do not know the answer soon at all, but we think we do. After this introduction, the text might simply have presented speeches made by Rokesmith and Boffin verbatim, and relied on the dialogue to achieve the desired effect,¹² but the text contains much which is not direct speech and which contributes to the deception.

¹² This is the case in the stage version of this part of the narrative. See *Mr Boffin's Secretary*, adapted by I.M. Pagan (London: Dent, 1902).

(iv) Adverbial Ambiguity

In particular, the deployment of adverbial clauses to describe each character's manner of speaking exploits considerable resources of ambiguity which may be turned to deceptive effect. Consider the effects achieved by the following fragment after Rokesmith has left the room and Boffin attempts to explain his attitude to Bella:

"As to Rokesmith, that young man of mine," said Mr Boffin, *dropping his voice and glancing towards the door with an apprehension of being overheard by some eavesdropper there*, "it's the same with him as with the footmen. I have found out that you must either scrunch them, or let them scrunch you" (III, v, 464) [my italics]

Retrospectively, we can understand why he should drop his voice and glance towards the door — this is part of his virtuoso performance as an increasingly angry and suspicious miser. As part of his act, he wishes Bella to think that he is apprehensive of being overheard.

But in an objective (authorial) sense, it cannot be true that Boffin really is apprehensive. The description is only valid if Bella is the subject, if the whole scene is presented through her eyes. But Bella has not been mentioned for a full page prior to this passage, and the majority of readers will have no means of discovering that she is the centre of consciousness, or that the text is as much an example of displaced I-narrative as anything to be found in *Persuasion*.

Displaced I-narration is an extremely common technique in third-person narratives, especially in examples of mystery and Austenian romance. The larger part of the narrative, or any self-contained portion, is seen through the filter of a central character so that very few of the advantages of I-narration need be sacrificed. Yet the implied *author* reserves the right to intervene (as he can only do with difficulty in I-narration), and may at any moment depart from the focal character and give an objective representation of the thoughts of another character. Or the text may, for a moment, be without a centre of consciousness altogether. Since there is no compulsion to establish clear-cut distinctions between different perspectives on events, rhetorical possibilities are almost unlimited.

If we consider the basic formula, "said *x* plus adverb, or adverbial clause", we can see easily the number of interpretative possibilities. Firstly, the adverbial clause may describe how *x* intended his speech to sound, the character's own rhetorical intention. Secondly, the adverb may describe the impression achieved in the mind of the interlocutor(s), or any member of the audience. Thirdly, it may be an authorial analysis of *x*'s state of mind or his true motive. Fourthly, the adverb

may describe the hypothetical point of view of the *reader* if he had been present at the scene.¹

As an indication of future (or present) developments, there is a large difference in reliability between the different categories. The third is the most reliable and the second (or, possibly, the fourth) the least. After any given speech, a different adverb might be chosen from each of these different perspectives, yet, almost invariably, only one is chosen, and it is up to the reader to draw whatever inferences he can about point of view. The frequency of incidence of each of the first three categories is approximately equal, so we cannot proceed from an assumption that a given instance is one type until proved otherwise. In an extended dialogue between characters who are at similar distances from the narrative centre,² it will be difficult indeed to determine perspective.

In the scenes involving Bella, Rokesmith, and the Boffins, we feel an equal interest in each of the characters and feel that we understand the motives and problems of each. So we are in no position to realise that almost all the adverbial clauses in these chapters may be placed in the second category above, and that they are positively misleading if considered as representing any other perspective. But it is often difficult to find any mention of Bella at all. The following introduction is typical:

“Rokesmith,” said Mr Boffin one evening when they were all in his room again, and he and the Secretary had been going over some accounts, “I am spending too much money. Or leastways, you are spending too much for me.” (III, v, 473).

There is no mention of Bella in the two pages following yet, retrospectively, we must say that she is the centre of consciousness throughout.

The text maintains the deception in quite brilliant and legitimate fashion,³ until Boffin is seen on his own:

“Now I wonder,” he meditated as he went along nursing his stick, “whether it can be, that Venus is setting himself to get the better of Wegg? Whether

1 A convenient example of the variety that is possible in the reference of adverbs in dialogue is provided by the episode in *The House at Pooh Corner* when Piglet contemplates the possible dialogue which would occur when the heffalump arrives at the trap. A.A. Milne, *The World of Pooh* (London: Methuen, 1977; 1st pub. 1926, 1928), II, iii, 202–03.

2 See p. 341, n. 12.

3 I am aware that this contrasts with the traditional evaluation of the plot of *Our Mutual Friend*. Frye, for example, says that: “In *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend* the romantic element, a sprawling octopus of a plot involving disguise, conspiracy, mystery, suspense, and violence, which we can hardly follow at the time and cannot remember afterwards, seems to be almost an anti-narrative” (a, p. 40).

it can be, that he means, when I have bought Wegg out, to have me all to himself and to pick me clean to the bones?" (III, xiv, 586).

This seems plausible enough to the first-time reader, accustomed to Boffin's new cynicism, but, after it has been revealed that Boffin has been acting all along, we can hardly believe that Boffin would take this incorrect view of Venus or adopt the final harsh metaphor.

The passage continues thus:

It was a cunning and suspicious idea, quite in the way of his school of Misers, and he looked very cunning and suspicious as he went jogging through the streets. More than once or twice, more than twice or thrice, say half-a-dozen times, he took his stick from the arm on which he nursed it, and hit a straight sharp rap at the air with its head. Possibly the wooden countenance of Mr Silas Wegg was incorporeally before him at those moments, for he hit with intense satisfaction. (III, xiv, 586).

There is no suggestion that Boffin is being watched or thinks he is being watched. So to whom does he look very cunning and suspicious? The *reader*, presumably, but the qualifier is not repeated, and we presume that the subsequent sentences in this paragraph are as reliable as the first, and that we are being given a reliable description of Boffin's inner state. It can only be an authorial perspective which concludes that this is a "cunning and suspicious idea" and there is certainly a case to be made that this is unfairly misleading. One possible justification is that Boffin has become so fond of his role that he continues to live it even when he is alone, or even that, in acting it, Boffin has actually *become* his role, and is now genuinely corrupted by his position of power and wealth.

I do not think that either of these arguments holds good when we read the text after the anagnorisis (IV, xiii, 771), because it is clear that Boffin is to be regarded as a kindly paternal figure who has enjoyed his role while it lasted, but is now content to return to a simpler life without airs and graces. In XV, xiv Wegg at last receives his punishment for his scheme to blackmail Boffin, but it is not Boffin who takes the opportunity to make amends for his treatment in the past. Instead, he takes no part as Rokesmith almost throttles the unsuspecting blackmailer. There is no qualification to the reversal of our understanding of Boffin which is achieved at the end of *Our Mutual Friend*.

But, as is true of Ezra Cohen's function in *Daniel Deronda*, plot and theme do not combine as well as they might. The discovery that Boffin has only been playing a part must function as a thematic reversal as well. His wealth, as we finally discover, does *not* corrupt Boffin, but leaves him as he was to start with. Since Boffin has been the major

exemplar of the theme that wealth corrupts, it is unfortunate that so much evidence should count for nothing.⁴

But the quality of the anagnorisis on the plot level is, in this case, sufficient to justify the confusion which is caused on the thematic level at the end of the text. The major blemish on this suspense structure is the scene we have discussed in which Boffin performs without an audience, especially since there is no tactical justification for such a scene to take place at all. Very few readers are likely to have any suspicions about Boffin at this point, or any great curiosity to observe him by himself. His gradual progress to miserly cynicism has been so minutely charted, for instance as he slowly becomes more choosy about which histories of misers he chooses to buy.⁵

Why should we suspect that the previously ingenuous Boffin is only playing a part, especially since it is one from which he stands to gain so little? This is the major triumph of retrospective suspense in *Our Mutual Friend*, but it is by no means the only mystery. The text reveals a certain opportunism in a surfeit of intermediate mysteries. Each time Venus is introduced for example, the *reader* is reminded of his unrequited love for an unnamed woman, and invited to speculate on possible candidates for this dubious distinction. This mystery, established in the second instalment (I, vii, 83), is finally resolved in the last (IV, xiv, 782), and few will have identified Venus's beloved, Pleasant Riderhood.

In no scene are they presented together, and their union has no genuine function except as the solution to a mystery. The same may be said for the text's short-term refusal to provide certain specific pieces of information, such as the identity of characters involved in a given scene. When Venus himself is introduced, we are asked to guess not at his identity, but at his occupation. His eyes are as sharp as those of a shoemaker, "but he is not that" (I, vii, 78), etc. It takes us a page or two to discover that he is a taxidermist, and the solution provides an anagnorisis of a very minor, but enjoyable, kind.

Such mysteries are most easily constructed on the first appearance of a character, creating a period of uncertainty before that individual is given an identity of provisional function, and is subsumed in our overall understanding of narrative progression. The point at which a new character is given a name tends to coincide with the moment when the *reader* can place that individual within his understanding of the text.

4 Many critics have been unhappy with this ending for precisely that reason, e.g. James M. Brown, *Dickens: Novelist in the Market-Place* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 158–59.

5 *Our Mutual Friend*, III, v, 467.

Identity suspense can be recycled when two characters who are familiar to the *reader*, but unfamiliar to each other, meet for the first time.

For instance, while the out-of-work Mortimer and Eugene are bemoaning their lot, they are visited in their office by an unnamed common fellow, and the reader immediately searches for a name to which he can adhere. At first the name seems to be Alfred David, and there is a considerable period for speculation before we learn that the visitor is Rogue Riderhood, whom we already know.⁶ Later (II, xii), Rogue and Pleasant Riderhood are visited in Limehouse Hole by a man, looking like a sailor, whose physical description does not resemble that of any character we have yet met. We can make neither head nor tail of his suspicions and questions. Riderhood notices that the stranger has various possessions of the late George Radfoot (a new name to the *reader*). At first, we wonder whether this fierce sailor has killed Radfoot and stolen his possessions, and then the text persuades us to suspect that Radfoot killed John Harmon, assuming that we still believe that Harmon is dead. But so many questions are suggested in quick succession that we hardly know what to suspect. It is only in the next chapter, after the sailor has left, that we are given the solution. The sailor takes off his disguise and all is revealed:

he ceased to be the oakum-headed, oakum-whiskered man on whom Pleasant Riderhood had looked, and, allowing for his still being wrapped in a nautical overcoat, became as like that same lost wanted Mr Julius Handford as never man was like another in this world (II, xiii, 365).

The text transfers immediately from confusing mystery to major anagnorisis, as Rokesmith's true identity is clarified at last.⁷

How many first-time readers will be surprised by the announcement, at the mid-point in the text, that John Harmon, not dead at all, is in fact the same man as Handford and Rokesmith? Rather more than is generally assumed, I suspect. The text, like *The Moonstone*, has long since given us equivocal indications that Rokesmith and Handford are the same man.⁸ But the basic link between Rokesmith and Harmon is much more carefully concealed. After all, we have "seen" the corpse, the inquest has been held, and the coffin buried.

6 *Our Mutual Friend*, I, xii.

7 The medium of the solution has met with much fair criticism. The internal monologue that we are given ("Don't evade it, John Harmon; don't evade it; think it out!") (II, xiii, 366), is implausible, and an admission to a friend or confidant would have been more appropriate. If it is true that no suitable confidant exists in the narrative, one should have been invented solely for this purpose.

8 e.g., the last sentence of the first instalment (I, iv, 43).

The only apparent mystery is the identity of the murderer, a pseudo-mystery which the text has devoted considerable space to developing.⁹ No-one has voiced the suspicion that Harmon is not dead, and there is no evident motive for feigning death. Furthermore, no one (e.g. the Boffins) has apparently recognised Rokesmith as Harmon. The text does not provide any obvious clue that Rokesmith and Harmon are one and the same, although we might suspect from Handford's visit to the police station (I, iiiii) that all is not what it seems.

Thus some readers will guess and others will not. The text does not control the understanding and expectations of all its readership, but must try to accommodate simultaneously readers with a very different understanding of the narrative. It appears that Dickens himself was conscious of this problem, or received some adverse comment from his readers in the course of serial publication, judging from the defensive wall which he eventually erects around this comparatively complex mystery. His ill-advised "Postscript, in lieu of Preface" commences:

When I devised this story, I foresaw the likelihood that a class of readers and commentators would suppose that I was at great pains to conceal exactly what I was at great pains to suggest: namely, that Mr John Harmon was not slain, and that Mr John Rokesmith was he (p. 821).

This claim, like so many authorial commentaries, simply is not true to the text. The *reader* could easily have been made aware, much earlier than II, xiii, that Rokesmith and Harmon are the same person, by the same expedient as is eventually employed, a simple announcement. In that case, the murder mystery would be omitted altogether, and we would not be asked to feel concern for Gaffer Hexam's reputation or suspect that Riderhood is the true villain. The *reader* would be offered other pleasures altogether, notably the potential sitcom pleasures of the Boffin-Rokesmith relationship (which are indeed exploited after the revelation).

If we had known his secret, a much more subtle presentation of Rokesmith would have been possible, at least prior to the deception of the second half of the novel. In other words, *Our Mutual Friend* might have been a totally different novel. Dickens's postscript is comparable to the announcement, at the end of a detective novel, that the *author* expected us to guess the identity of the murderer right at the beginning. A mystery offers little pleasure if it has been prematurely solved because the reader is no longer properly aligned to the narrative direction and so feels frustrated. Not only was Dickens not at great pains to suggest that Rokesmith was Harmon, it might even be suggested that there are not enough clues provided by the text that this is the truth of the matter.

⁹ See, e.g. the incident (I, vi, 76), in which Lizzie is alarmed at the way her father grips his knife.

(v) Problems of Mystery and Serialisation

But the problem is inherent in the combination of mystery and serial publication. Dickens may have realised, to his own consternation, that this was the case, but he was firmly committed to both forms. His discussion of the problem in the Postscript maintains his assumption that the *reader* is supposed to guess the solution to the mystery at an early point:

To keep for a long time unsuspected, yet always working itself out, another purpose originating in that leading incident, and turning it to a pleasant and useful account at last, was at once the most interesting and the most difficult part of my design. Its difficulty was much enhanced by the mode of publication; for it would be very unreasonable to expect that many readers, pursuing a story in portions from month to month through nineteen months, will, until they have it before them complete, perceive the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern which is always before the eyes of the story-weaver at his loom (p. 821)

Dickens is suggesting here that if the reader had been given the advantage of an uninterrupted reading of the text he would have been easily able to perceive that Rokesmith and Harmon were the same man, as Dickens intended all along. I would suggest that the difficulties caused by serial publication are the reverse of this, that a reading punctuated by enforced pauses makes it easier for the reader to gain a true perspective on the narrative. Mystery, as a genre, relies on the inability of the average reader to stop reading for a moment and to consider the implications of what has happened so far. Furthermore, if there is a nationwide simultaneous reading, broken up into monthly instalments, it is inevitable that solvers will reveal the solutions to non-solvers,¹ and as long as there are clues there will be solvers.

If the author is still engaged in writing the text itself, he may be provoked into a premature revelation of the truth, as is arguably the case in *Our Mutual Friend*, or the assertion that he never intended that there should be a mystery at all. For these reasons, mystery, unless it is of particularly original or complex design, is not suited to a reading punctuated by long periods for reflection and the opportunity to write intermediate reviews.

If we had only half of *Murder on the Orient Express*, for example, many readers would regard it as “obvious” that all the suspects had combined in the murder; there are enough clues already to make this solution

1 See p. 352, n. 22.

almost certain.² But, if the reader has another page in front of him to occupy his attention, he is less likely to take the time to weigh up the evidence and, in all probability, he will not consciously formulate the solution.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood has suffered this fate precisely. Circumstances have allowed an unlimited period for reflection, and most have no doubt that John Jasper was to be exposed, eventually, as the murderer of his nephew. Critics have either sought an alternative solution (without success), or lamented the fact that the mystery, as it stands, was simply not subtle enough to test the shrewd reader. As with the problem of Rokesmith's identity, we should remember that the contemporary reader would have been far less experienced with this type of narrative than we are. If Jasper is indeed guilty,³ the text could certainly have provided less clues, but it chooses not to. It is true that there is hardly a superfluity of alternative solutions to the mystery of Drood's disappearance, once we discount the obvious possibility that Neville Landless has something to do with it. But it would not have been impossible (although unlikely at this date) for the text to turn round and implicate Landless.

From the perspective of the first-time reader, there is very little evidence in the early part of *Edwin Drood* (apart from the title) that a murder is to be committed at all, and such an event does not match the mood of much of this light and playful narrative. The mystery may not be one of murder. Our generic uncertainty in the early stages of *Edwin Drood* may inhibit assimilation of the clues which suggest Jasper's guilt.⁴ Again, it may not be clear to all readers that Jasper's protestations of affection for his nephew are insincere. There are clues indeed that Jasper has a motive for murder, but these might easily be missed by a reader who does not suspect that a murder is to be committed.⁵ Very few readers have total recall of narrative details: we remember the ones that seem important at the time, although a solution may succeed in awakening a latent memory by recreating a context.

2 Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (London: Collins, 1934).

3 The presentation of Jasper might have developed along similar lines to that of Mr Elliot in *Persuasion*, as a clever double bluff. Jasper has usually been presumed to be guilty of murder, but I am inclined to accept the view of Lawrence Frank: "For Drood to die, in a Dickensian state of grace, would seem implausible. He has made the choice both John Harmon and Eugene Wrayburn have made before him: he has refused to acquiesce in outmoded notions, to the view of an "other" as his rightful property." Lawrence Frank, "The Intelligibility of Madness in *Our Mutual Friend* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*", *Dickens Studies Annual*, V (1976), 150–95, p. 184.

4 Genre suspense is the reader's overall uncertainty about the generic direction of a particular narrative. This uncertainty may be caused by a number of factors, including inconsistency of tone and a doubt about the seriousness of the transgressions which have produced the complications of the story.

5 Motive is usually extraneous and irrelevant in a murder mystery, as Champigny has ably demonstrated (*What Will Have Happened*, p. 18).

We tend to remember the details which the text persuades us to remember. By the time that we know that Drood has disappeared, a large part of the readership will not automatically remember that Jasper's feelings towards Rosa Bud gave him a possible motive for murder, just as in *Bleak House*, the reader will probably forget that Hortense has a grudge against Tulkinghorn. The chapter arrangement in *Bleak House* gives us no clue that a murder is to be committed, so we have little incentive to remember the details, and the same might be said of *Edwin Drood*.

The author himself is in a good, but not necessarily ideal, position to judge the memory capacity of the first-time reader. Looking back on *Our Mutual Friend*, the solution to the identity mystery may well have seemed more obvious to the author than it actually did to the contemporary reader, who may well not even suspect that there is a doubt about the death of John Harmon.

(vi) The Implications of Character Lists in OUP Editions of Dickens's Novels

Ideally, as critics of suspense, we would remember our first reading of a novel and the extent to which we were taken in by a mystery. This, of course, would be the crucial test of my hypotheses. But many readers of *Our Mutual Friend* today are not allowed to enjoy the identity mystery at all because the edition they are using is prefaced by a list of characters, with a brief description of each. Such lists, presumably, are intended to give the reader his bearings when lost in the middle of the narrative. Thus when the strange, dark, young man comes to examine the corpse at the police station and gives his name as Julius Handford, the inquisitive reader is sure to flip back to the “*dramatis personae*”, in the hope that this will provide a context for an understanding of Mr Handford's function in the narrative. Indeed, he finds exactly the answer he is looking for:

JOHN HARMON, *alias* JULIUS HANDFORD, *alias* JOHN ROKESMITH, heir to the Harmon estate (p. xxvi).

Thus the mystery structure of the first half of *Our Mutual Friend* is dismissed at a stroke.

A few problems remain, it is true. We do not know why Harmon should choose to conceal his true identity while there is a fortune to collect, and while blame for his “death” is falling on such innocent men as Gaffer Hexam. But those questions are tangential to the text as it stands, which concentrates its energies in developing the pseudo-mystery of Harmon's murder, and the mystery of Rokesmith's function in the narrative. The intended text-reader relationship, in one of its most important aspects, is destroyed by the inclusion of the solution at the beginning of the text.

This baffling state of affairs dates from O.U.P.'s World's Classics edition of *Great Expectations*, first published in 1907.¹ Previous editions of Dickens's novels in the same series do not contain lists of characters,² but all subsequent texts do so. At first, these texts were attributed to Henry Frowde as publisher, but the practice has continued through the larger part of this century. Since these texts are used world-wide by Dickens scholars and are to be found in most public libraries, it is fair

1 *Great Expectations*, The World's Classics CXXVIII (London: O.U.P., 1907). The publication of this series is attributed to Henry Frowde.

2 The earlier Dickens texts in the same series do not contain lists of characters (*Oliver Twist*, VIII; *A Tale of Two Cities*, XXXVI; *Pickwick Papers*, CXX, CXXI).

to say that the typical reader now reads Dickens in an edition prefaced by a character list. Other publishing houses have borrowed the lists without attributing them to anyone other than Dickens.³ Dickens is not the only novelist to fall victim to this curious practice,⁴ but, for our purposes, he is the most important example.

I have been unable to ascertain from Oxford University Press any information on the genesis of the list of characters or its rationale.⁵ Who devised these lists, and why they have become part of the standard text are questions which have proved particularly difficult to answer. They are the product of a period which did not set much value on such mundane matters as plot, but they have not been questioned at any later date.

There is hardly a Dickens text in which identity-suspense does not play a greater or a lesser part, or, in other words, in which the reader is not expected to gain a certain amount of pleasure from his ignorance and eventual discovery. Yet almost every instance of identity-suspense is cancelled out by the “*dramatis personae*”. *Oliver Twist*, for example, has its hermeneutic structure undermined by a character list which includes the following entries:

MONKS, a half-brother of Oliver Twist.
MRS CORNEY, matron of a workhouse; afterwards married to Mr Bumble
AGNES FLEMING, mother of Oliver Twist.
ROSE MAYLIE, adopted daughter of the preceding [i.e. Mrs Maylie] (pp xxv-xxvi)

Such information effectively turns the first-time reader into a second-time reader, and presupposes that the experiences of the second-time reader are more valuable. Is Monks, for example, half so threatening once we know that he is a half-brother of Oliver? Immediately, his actions are capable of being fitted into a rational, human explanation. Half-brothers (e.g. Edmund and Edgar in *King Lear*)⁶ in fiction at least, do not tend to be too fond of each other, often because one inherits money, land, or title, which the other thinks should go to him.

The basic identity-suspense of *Barnaby Rudge* is eliminated for most readers if they care to glance at the character list. There one finds an entry for Mr Rudge senior,⁷ father of Barnaby, who is thus clearly not

3 e.g., *Great Expectations* (London: Collins, 1955).

4 O.U.P. brought out a complete edition of Scott's novels in 1911–12, all with character lists, including *Quentin Durward* (1912; 1st pub. 1823) which does not have a character list in the near-identical edition of 1907.

5 Two letters to the Librarian of O.U.P.'s Publishing Department have elicited no response, apart from one communication to the effect that my queries were being dealt with.

6 *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1952).

7 “MR RUDGE, father of Barnaby, and formerly steward to Mr Reuben Haredale” (*Barnaby Rudge*, p. xx).

dead at all. This is all the confirmation we need that Solomon Daisy's story is inaccurate, and we will guess, still more easily, that the widow's strange and violent visitor is her husband. If this is no great loss to *Barnaby Rudge* as a whole, considerable damage is inflicted on a reading of *Bleak House*. Some secrets are given away by the character list, while others are not, as may be seen from the following selection of entries:

CAPTAIN HAWDON ("Nemo") a military officer; afterwards a law-writer
 GEORGE ROUNCEWELL ("Mr George"), another son [of Mrs Rouncewell]; a wild young lad, who enlists; afterwards keeper of a shooting gallery.
 LADY HONORIA DEDLOCK, a proud and ambitious woman; the wife of Sir Leicester Dedlock.
 MISS FLITE, a little, half-crazed old woman, a suitor in Chancery
 MADEMOISELLE HORTENSE, Lady Dedlock's waiting-woman.
 ESTHER SUMMERSON, the protégée of Mr Jarndyce; a prudent and wise woman, and a self-denying friend (pp xxi-xxii)

Thus we are not told of the family relationship between Esther and Lady Dedlock, but we are told that George is the son of Mrs Rouncewell. We are given considerable assistance towards an understanding of Nemo and Miss Flite which is not provided by the text when they are first mentioned, but we are not told of the relationship between Hawdon and Lady Dedlock. Some might argue that this is helpful and well-judged assistance for the reader, but it is certainly not part of the reading experience intended by the text.

While *Bleak House* is at least left with a large element of its mystery, there is not much left of the mystery structure of *Little Dorrit* after the following free information:

RIGAUD *alias* BLANDOIS *alias* LAGNIER, a smooth, polished scoundrel.
 ARTHUR CLENNAM, the adopted son of Mrs Clennam.
 MRS CLENNAM, an invalid; a hard, stern, austere woman (p xxv).

This leaves very little for the reader to work out for himself. Although Rigaud is soon identified as Blandois, the relationship between Mrs Clennam and Arthur is obscured until the *dénouement*. The rest of the mystery is hardly worth preserving once so much has been revealed. However, the effect of the character list before *Great Expectations* is not easy to access; the most important assistance is the entry, "ABEL MAGWITCH, *alias* PROVIS, an escaped convict". This makes it clear that the convict who frightens Pip in the first chapters will appear at some later stage in the narrative, presumably in disguise. Such a warning makes it easier to anticipate that Magwitch, as well as Miss Havisham, is a potential benefactor, especially in conjunction with the other clues that the text provides. The careful balance is now weighted too heavily on one side.

One suspects that all the character lists were constructed by the same author, because they are relatively consistent, not only in typographical

peculiarities, but also in the type of information which they offer to the reader, and the type of mysteries which are judged to be not worth concealing. Cases of identity-suspense and aliases are solved in advance, while other narrative mysteries which do not involve disguise are allowed to run their course. Marriages are specified, often when they are peripheral to the main text,⁸ but also those which complete complicated suspense structures, such as in *David Copperfield*:

MISS DORA SPENLOW, the only daughter of Mr Spenlow; a timid, sensitive, artless little beauty, afterwards the “child-wife” of David Copperfield (p. xix).

This not only gives away a major part of the plot, David’s marriage to Dora, but carries a strong hint that she will be no more than a “child-wife”, i.e. that she will not live to become a mature woman. The subtle variety of Austenian romance in *David Copperfield* is one of the most interesting aspects of the text, and it is unfortunate that the balance of expectations should be upset in this way.

The description of Dora provides more than plot information, giving us a very specific description of Dora’s character as well. Such a prescriptive analysis of characters tends to reduce them to caricatures by making their movements predictable.⁹ Dora interests the reader (and David) precisely *because* she is something more than the list of attributes with which she is pigeon-holed. Because we are given part of the truth here, it is easy to forget that it is not the whole truth. But the same loss of life may also be suffered by those who are usually considered caricatures, for instance in *Our Mutual Friend*:

MR JOHN PODSNAP, a member of “society”, and a pompous, self-satisfied man.
MR HAMILTON VENEERING, a parvenu, tolerated by “society” on account of his wealth (p. xxvi).

Who, having read the text, could be satisfied with such belittling descriptions, which fail to suggest the life and energy which make these characters *matter* to the reader. The picture is framed for him before he starts, and Podsnap no longer threatens to leap out of the text and take the reader by the throat.

Our apprehension of character may be affected in a different way by the character list which precedes *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

JONAS CHUZZLEWIT, his [Antony’s] son; a sly, cunning, scheming man (p. xxiii).

8 The marriage of Louisa and Bounderby is revealed by the character list of *Hard Times*, but there are a number of Dickensian marriages which are not mentioned.

9 See my distinction between character and caricature, p. 101, above.

This does the reader's work for him, and destroys what little character suspense there is in this text. When Jonas first appears in Chapter Eleven, we see him as the courteous suitor of Charity Pecksniff, and it is only by stages that we learn what sort of man he really is. The description of Jonas is a true one, but Dickens would rather we learnt that truth for ourselves. Thus it is not just Dickens's plotting, but also his character presentation, which is dismissed as not being of any great interest to the scholarly reader.

The implication is that the mystery plot and character suspense are troublesome distractions from more important questions of thematic development. Character itself is presumed to be a collection of static attributes rather than a changing relationship with a reader. It is tempting to ask if anyone would read Dickens if it were not for his characterisation and his plotting!

The introduction and widespread acceptance of these character lists is a clear indication that the sources of our pleasure in reading the novel have been universally misunderstood, or, at least, understood in a very different way from that implied here. I have attempted to show that there is an increasingly large element of mystery in Dickens's novels as his career develops, and that the mysteries in his last texts are far more subtle than has often been thought. Dickens, rather than Wilkie Collins, should be thought of as the most important mystery writer of the Victorian period, even though Dickens never concentrated all his imaginative energies on the development of the genre in the way that Collins did.

Both writers experimented with what I have called the Biercian and Collinsian types of mystery without finally settling for one form rather than the other. *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens's last completed text, is divided neatly into two halves, one of which develops a mystery with a gradual solution, and the other whose mystery is solved in its entirety at the end of the text. Since the latter is clearly the more successful of the two, it may well have helped to influence the numerous Dickens admirers who have written detective novels in this century, a period which reveals a strong bias towards the one-solution mystery.

The Mayor of Casterbridge and the Generic Determinants of Tragedy

(i) Hardy as a Writer of Mystery

Hardy's career as a novelist commenced shortly after Dickens had died at the height of his powers and Collins had already produced his best work. the aesthetic and technical possibilities of the hermeneutic mystery had been thoroughly explored by these two writers, and a market had been created for this type of fiction. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that Hardy, in his early work, wrote mysteries, indeed very sophisticated mysteries, both of the Collinsian and Biercian varieties. But, despite his undoubted skill as a writer of mystery, Hardy did not achieve much commercial success in this form, and turned to other genres, notably tragedy, in which his mark was profound and indelible.

The pleasure gained by new generations of readers of Hardy is mainly a consequence of his mastery of the techniques of tragedy, a genre much older than mystery, and those techniques form the main subject of this chapter. But *Desperate Remedies* itself, as a Collinsian mystery, is much more polished than anything Collins ever wrote, and may serve, briefly, as an example of the successful mystery which works itself through a number of minor anagnorises to a final solution.¹

The central mystery in *Desperate Remedies* is a variation on the "unrecognisable corpse" situation which is seen in simple form in *Barnaby Rudge* and *Our Mutual Friend*.² Here the corpse is allegedly

1 Thomas Hardy, *Desperate Remedies* (London: Macmillan, 1975; 1st pub. 1871). All quotations and references to Hardy's novels are taken from Macmillan's New Wessex Edition, published in 1974 and 1975. The original dates of publication of the major novels are as follows:

1871 *Desperate Remedies* (1975)

1872 *Under the Greenwood Tree; or The Mellstock Quire: a Rural Painting of the Dutch School* (1974)

1874 *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1974)

1878 *The Return of the Native* (1974)

1886 *The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge: a Story of a Man of Character* (1974)

1887 *The Woodlanders* (1974)

1891 *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: a Pure Woman* (1974)

1896 *Jude the Obscure* (1974)

1897 *The Well-Beloved: a Sketch of a Temperament* (1975)

2 See pp. 167–72, 224–27.

that of one Mrs Manston, the victim of a fire in the inn at which she was staying, but the experienced reader will not be convinced by the limited evidence which is offered:

It was persistently hoped, however, that some traces of the body would survive the effect of the hot coals, and after a search pursued uninterruptedly for thirty hours, under the direction of Manston himself, enough was found to set at rest any doubts of her fate.

The melancholy gleanings consisted of her watch, bunch of keys, a few coins, and two charred and blackened bones (xi, 207).

At the inquest, no doubt is expressed at the assumption that these bones are those of Mrs Manston. In fact, it does not matter whether the reader assumes that Mrs Manston is dead, or that she will eventually reappear in the action, because this initial position is left far behind by a series of reversals which convince the reader that she is alternately alive, then dead, then alive, then dead once more.³ Either solution may of course be justified from the above evidence.

In the end, we discover that Aeneas Manston accidentally killed his wife in his rage when he discovered that she was still alive on the evening of the fire, and “planted” the above evidence to suggest that she had, in fact, died in the fire. But when Manston eavesdrops on a conversation of two local poachers, one of whom had overheard him talking to a woman that night, and possibly injuring her, it becomes necessary to substitute a new Mrs Manston for the old, in order to prevent the poacher from voicing his suspicions.

In itself, this might seem like an implausible and unlikely sequence of events, but it is one which makes possible the series of misconceptions which form the major part of the anticipated reading experience. Every detail in the text is designed to function according to this basic scheme, combined with the connected mystery of Miss Aldclyffe’s past life and her connection to Aeneas Manston. Many of the details function as clues to be understood only when a particular stage of the solution has been reached, and Hardy shows a fertile imagination in this respect.

For instance, when Manston receives a letter from his “wife” in response to the advertisements he has placed, we are unlikely to suspect that any trickery is being perpetrated. He receives the letter, which purports to justify the renewed appearance of Mrs Manston, when he is being

3 Joseph Chinney’s allegation that he saw Mrs Manston on the night of the fire is recorded at xiii, 263–64; this is confirmed by the letter he seems to receive from his wife at xiv, 283–84; Owen Graye’s evidence that the present “Mrs Manston” is not the same woman as his first wife, with the deduction that she is therefore dead, is to be found at xvii, 322; in Ch. xviii, the fake Mrs Manston questions Manston on whether his first wife is alive or dead. His manner of insisting that she was burnt (p. 333) suggests that he knows she is still alive; the mystery is resolved when the corpse itself is dug up at xix, 362.

visited by a Mr Dickson, whom he considers a bore, and who, we are told, is surprised to be invited to Manston's home at all. Retrospectively, we see that Dickson has been invited to act as witness, but the clue can be used twice, once to trigger a false anagnorisis, and once as part of the final solution.⁴

Desperate Remedies indeed contrives a number of plausible, but finally misleading, moments of illumination, for instance when Edward Springrove discovers that the present Mrs Manston is not the same woman as the original. Cytherea leaps to the conclusion, on the basis of the same evidence that is available to the *reader*, that Mrs Manston must have died in the fire after all. Suddenly, the whole of the preceding narrative seems to make sense, and it is only some time afterwards that we discover that the explanation is not quite so plausible as it seems, and that our faith in Cytherea's intuition was misplaced.⁵

The red herring may be described as a tentative structuring device, a possible solution, which is not stressed by the text in the same way as the false anagnorisis, but which, because it is not underlined,⁶ is more likely to deceive the wary reader. Since it lies below the surface of the narrative argument, the text does not have to backtrack later to explain the red herring away.

It is thus a "free" device, and a good example in *Desperate Remedies* is the account of the death of the night-porter, Chinney, who had alleged that he had seen Mrs Manston leaving on the night of the fire.⁷ In his semi-insane state, Chinney had disappeared after his revelation and it is announced, eventually, that Chinney died when he fell from a ship sailing from Liverpool to America.⁸ This follows less than two pages after we are presented with Owen Graye's speculative thoughts which result from his discovery that the present Mrs Manston is an impostor:

Was it possible that the real Mrs Manston, who was known to be a Philadelphian by birth, had returned by the train to London, as the porter

4 The invitation had been a "pleasant surprise to Dickson himself, insomuch that Manston, as a rule, voted him a bore almost to his face" (xiv, 283).

When Mrs Manston is thought to be a fake (xvii, 321–22), and it is presumed that the real Mrs Manston is therefore still alive, the careful reader will inevitably recall that the presence of Mr Dickson when he received the letter was so suspiciously arranged.

5 We see that there is no good reason why Manston should pretend that another woman is his first wife if the survival of a first wife is the only obstacle to the acquisition of a wife, Cytherea, whom he really does love.

6 See the discussion of the *ceratin*, p. 203. The same principle is true at a thematic level (see pp. 147–51).

7 *Desperate Remedies*, xiii, 263–64.

8 Mr Raunham tells Owen and Cytherea that, "He got to Liverpool and embarked, intending to work his way to America, but on the passage he fell overboard and was drowned" (xviii, 328).

had said, and then left the country under an assumed name, to escape the worst kind of widowhood — the misery of being wedded to a fickle, faithless and truant husband? (xviii, 327)

There is nothing to connect these two units of the text except their proximity in the reading experience, and it might be suggested that any connection we imagine between the two is not a deliberate part of the textual design. But Mrs Manston's birthplace, the manner of Chinney's death, and the timing of its announcement, are irrelevant to any other aspect of the mystery (therefore "free" motifs). So it is far from accidental that the *reader* is persuaded to suspect that the real Mrs Manston, still alive, has murdered Chinney because the night-porter was still in possession of some dangerous secret. But Chinney has in fact given an honest account of all that he knows, and no further reference to his death needs to be made for the text to justify the red herring.

There are no loose links, or implausible connections, in the causal chain, such as we find in even the best of Collins's mysteries.⁹ The reader's only complaint can be that he is not given a fair chance to solve the mystery. In his suicide note, Manston explains that he had met with his wife near his own house, late on the night of the fire, after he had walked home with Mr Raunham.¹⁰ But the narrative does not, as is necessary, alert us to the possibility of an ellipsis at this point in the narrative, at the very end of Chapter Ten:¹¹

He turned homeward again, in the company of the rector, who had considerably persuaded him to retire from the scene for a while, and promised that as soon as a man could live amid the embers of the Three Tranters Inn, they should be carefully searched for the remains of his unfortunate wife.

Manston then went indoors to wait for morning. (x, 201).

At the beginning of Chapter Eleven, Aeneas Manston, still ostensibly the centre of consciousness, is shown waking up the following morning. In fact Manston does not enter his house at that point, but sees his wife, argues with her, strikes and kills her, hides the body in a secret compartment, goes to bed, gets up again a little later, takes the keys and watch from the corpse, finds some bones in the local graveyard, surreptitiously throws these things into the remains of the fire, and returns to bed, a substantial unconfessed ellipsis.

9 See pp. 195–97, p. 353, n. 10.

10 "He parted from me at the steps of my porch, and went back towards the rectory. Whilst I still stood at the door, musing on my strange deliverance, I saw a figure advance from beneath the shadow of the park trees. It was the figure of a woman" (xxi, 373).

11 According to Genette, an *ellipsis* is a "leap forward without any return" (*Narrative Discourse*, p. 43).

It is not necessary that Manston should be the centre of consciousness at this point in order to establish the mystery. It is awkward that, with such a huge guilty secret presumably weighing on his mind, Manston should also be the centre of consciousness at occasional subsequent points.¹² Hardy, like George Eliot, was very reluctant to deny himself the possibility of presenting each and every character's thoughts, if and when he deemed it interesting. The text of *Desperate Remedies* gives us access to a large number of minds, and, at some point, every single major character is the centre of consciousness and "open" to the *reader*. Such tactics, resulting, one must presume, from a strong authorial interest in these mental processes, continue throughout Hardy's career and may be one reason why he abandoned mystery in favour of tragedy.

Desperate Remedies offers the *reader* a number of genuine intermediate revelations, and yet retains enough of its essential secret for a strong finish. But Hardy was also interested in constructing mysteries in which the final revelation transforms our understanding of the whole of the preceding text, as is the case in the latter part of *Our Mutual Friend*. Such an interest is shown in a number of shorter narratives which fall quite clearly in the category of adventure-turned-to-mystery.¹³ "Destiny and a Blue Cloak", published in 1874,¹⁴ is a typical example of this genre in that the central character (Agatha Pollin) acts throughout on the assumption that she is a free agent, only to discover at the end that she is the victim of a long-term strategy of revenge, and that her actions have largely been determined in advance.¹⁵ As happens so often in the stories of Ambrose Bierce, the final action of the heroine, as she attempts to free herself from her predicament, is, ironically, the one which effectively seals her fate,

12 e.g., xiv 279–82; xviii, 332–37.

13 For discussion of the adventure-turned-to-mystery, see pp. 193, 212–13, and elsewhere.

14 "Destiny and a Blue Cloak" was first pub. in the *New York Times* on Sunday Oct. 4th, 1874. It is included in the New Wessex Edition of the Stories of Thomas Hardy, III, *Old Mrs Chundle and Other Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 19–40.

15 The heroine (Agatha Pollin) falls in love with a young man (Oswald Winwood), whose acquaintance she has only made by pretending to be the village beauty (Frances Lovill). Winwood goes off to make his fortune in India, but promises to return and marry Agatha one day. In the meantime, she is pursued by an objectionable and ancient relation of the village beauty (Farmer Lovill), and she is persuaded to set a date for marrying him because of the debts of her uncle/guardian, unless Winwood, as he promises, returns for her. Agatha is confident of Winwood's fidelity, but the *reader* has less reason to believe that Winwood, now that he is prosperous, is still in love with her.

On the morning of her marriage to Lovill, Agatha makes a desperate attempt to remedy the situation and escape, but her husband-to-be is informed of her plans by the long-disappointed village beauty and, consequently, foils her scheme. Meanwhile, Winwood returns, and is persuaded by the village beauty that Agatha is out for a drive with them; she is to marry today, and so he leaves once more. Thus Agatha marries the objectionable farmer after all, and must contend with the gloating explanations of Miss Lovill, who has secretly controlled so many of the events of the narrative.

whereas, if she had been content to do nothing, she would probably have lived happily ever after.

“Destiny and a Blue Cloak” reveals the classical pattern of the Biercian short story, in that there is a sympathetic central character, whose thoughts we follow, and another individual, about whose actions we are persuaded to make incorrect assumptions. The discovery of the true position of the closed character provides the twist in the conclusion and the transformation of the earlier narrative.¹⁶

The same is true of another promising story (“For Want of a Word” or “Sparrow Story”),¹⁷ in which the hero assumes that the girl he loves has become engaged to another man, whereas, in fact, she wears a ring to compensate for the fact that he has never proposed to her. This type of twist of circumstance lies at the heart of many of Hardy’s longer narratives, where the best of intentions produce the worst of results, notably in the actions of Grace Melbury, Clym Yeobright, and Sue Bridehead, contributing inadvertently to the deaths of Giles Winterbourne, Mrs Yeobright, and Jude Fawley. The crucial difference is that the *reader* has a very different perspective on the later texts, seeing many of the errors in advance and the tragedies to which they will contribute.

16 i.e., the discovery that Francis Lovell bears a grudge against Agatha after all these years, and is aware of her schemes to escape marriage to Farmer Lovell. Similarly, Windood’s character and intentions are discovered to be *better* than we had anticipated.

17 “Sparrow Story” or “For Want of a Word” was never formally completed, but the various versions of this quaint story are included in the same volume as “Destiny and a Blue Cloak” (see n. 14, above).

(ii) Tragic Theme Suspense

In Chapter Five, we considered the position of the first-time reader as he responds to different genres.¹

Despite the strong sense of pre-determination eventually achieved by both, mystery and tragedy are at opposite ends of that spectrum of responses. The basic pleasure offered to the reader of tragedy is that of a productive conflict between his hopes and his expectations. The reader hopes that the sympathetic hero will triumph over his situation or “fate”, but knows, if only at a subconscious level, that, in all probability, this will not be the case. Since the ending is foreseen in advance, there is much less prospective suspense in tragedy than adventure, and a larger measure of prospective destiny, the sense that one particular ending is sure to take place. The *reader* not only understands the narrative present, but also the narrative future, and the process of which the narrative present is but one stage. He is in a more privileged and knowledgeable position than any character within the narrative, and no important part of the narrative past is closed to him.

It is difficult to create this sense of prospective destiny in tragedy if the text also attempts to maintain one or more mysteries, since mystery involves a veiling of the narrative present and past and a limiting of the *reader's* perspective. Hardy may be said to learn, slowly, to avoid this mistake. Most of the early works, whether tragedy or not, contain a number of mysteries,² and it should not escape our notice how much of *The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge* is taken up with attempts to create retrospective suspense of one sort or another. The two principal plot-secrets both concern Elizabeth-Jane, that she is not the daughter of Henchard but of Newson, and that her father, presumed to have died at sea, is not in fact dead.

Of the two deceptions, the second is less likely to hoodwink the nineteenth century reader because the reappearance of characters presumed dead is so common.³ For many experienced readers, it would be a surprise if Newson did *not* return. But the discovered birth mystery is less easy to predict despite the frequency of such mysteries

1 See pp. 155–61.

2 Hardy's own category of “Novels of Ingenuity” consists entirely of texts from the earlier part of his career. *Far From the Madding Crowd* is representative of the early Hardyan tragedy in that an extensive mystery is constructed around the roles and past lives of Troy and Fanny Robin, whose own tragedy is obscured because we do not understand what is happening. We are asked to believe that Troy is dead, and yet he returns (lii, 368–69) at the narrative climax.

3 Hardy had already exploited the same device in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (see n. 19).

in texts of the time. Elizabeth-Jane has the same name as Henchard's remembered daughter, and Susan does not correct his mistake, so we have little reason to anticipate the revelation. Hardy must assiduously refrain from making the Dickensian mistake of referring to Elizabeth-Jane as Henchard's "daughter", at least in his own voice, and there are occasions when he comes close to crossing the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate deception.⁴

In fact, one can admire Hardy's audacious handling of some of the clues. One breakfast time, the three members of the family are together when Henchard remarks:

"I thought Elizabeth-Jane's hair — didn't you tell me that Elizabeth-Jane's hair promised to be black when she was a baby?" (xiv, 114)

The first-time reader is too busy noticing the clue apparently given to Elizabeth-Jane by Henchard's carelessness to see the clue that is being given to the reader himself. Because the reader feels that he is one step ahead of the characters, he does not lose his sense of impending tragedy, and the eventual anagnorisis does not cost him his superior perspective. But, at this point, the *reader* actually knows less than any character except Henchard, and thus can only detect false ironies. The disadvantage is that Susan must remain relatively closed to the *reader* and little sorrow is felt at her death.

Such "tricks" are rare in Hardy's last two major novels.⁵ In *Jude the Obscure*, the author makes a brief attempt to convince us that Jude and Sue are married when they are not,⁶ achieving confusion rather than pleasurable revelation. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, it takes a little while to discover that Alec is not truly related to the heroine.⁷ But these are comparatively insignificant examples besides the full-scale plot-secrets of the earlier tragedies. This constitutes a reversion to the Shakespearean tragic model in which opportunities are rarely taken for generating retrospective suspense.⁸

In general, the tragedian gains considerable advantages from the comparative equality of the *reader*, in that he can stand back from the

4 After Henchard has remarried Susan, the narrator tells us that Farfrae is interested in Elizabeth-Jane: "Donald Farfrae's gaze, it is true, was now attracted by the Mayor's so-called step-daughter, but he was only one" (xv, 120). But the narrator knows that Elizabeth-Jane is his real step-daughter.

5 By major novels, I refer to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. *The Well-Beloved* does not contain much mystery, but, indeed, this would have been inappropriate in a text whose main theme is the repetition, and therefore predictability, of experience.

6 *Jude the Obscure*, V, v, although the reader's position is not clearly defined.

7 This misconception lasts until I, v, 63–64.

8 The best consideration of the perspective of the audience on Shakespeare's tragedies is that of Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Tragic Practice* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1979).

narrative and make observations about the overall process and its relation to the real world beyond the text.

The reader of tragedy *expects* that the text will introduce an ethical and philosophical perspective, even an answer to the problems of human inadequacy and pain which it raises. A tragedy which did not reach out to a universal level, albeit only tentatively, would be a disappointment to most readers; the philosophical speculation is part of the genre.

The characters in a tragedy may or may not reveal qualities which seem to imply that the *author* holds an optimistic view of human nature, but it is almost inevitable that the story as a whole, culminating as it does in catastrophe, is going to suggest some kind of pessimism. Furthermore, in order to create a sense of prospective destiny and impending catastrophe, it is important that philosophical and quasi-philosophical comments suggest a pessimistic view of the universe. Otherwise, the reader will suspect that the hero will overcome his difficulties, so that his death, when it occurs, will be a surprise.

Surprise has no place in the conclusion of a tragedy, for the processes which lead to the death of the sympathetic protagonist should be seen from an early stage. The *reader*, for instance, of *The Life and Death of the Mayor of Casterbridge: A Story of a Man of Character* knows even before he begins the first chapter that he should expect a tragedy.

To create a sense of reality and relevance, a tragedy must therefore imply an *author* who holds a view of the universe which is less than wholly optimistic, even if the author is in fact quite happy writing the most light-hearted of comedies and romances. Throughout his non-fictional writings, his prefaces, essays, and autobiography,⁹ Hardy insisted that there was no necessary connection between the philosophy suggested by the tragedies that he happened to write and his own real-life views, in other words, that the philosophy was generically determined.¹⁰

But such disclaimers have been persistently ignored by scholarly criticism of his own and subsequent times which has equated narrator and author. John Reed, for example,¹¹ says that Hardy

9 *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840–1928* (2 vols.), attributed to Florence Emily Hardy (London: Macmillan, 1962; 1st pub. 1929). It is generally presumed that Hardy himself was the true author of this “biography”. See also, *Thomas Hardy’s Personal Writings, Prefaces, Literary Opinions, Reminiscences*, ed. Harold Orel (London: Macmillan, 1967).

10 See, e.g., the General Preface to the Wessex Edition of the Novels and Poems of 1912: Differing natures find their tongue in the presence of differing spectacles. Some natures become vocal at tragedy, some are made vocal by comedy, and it seems to me that to whichever of these aspects of life a writer’s instinct for expression the more readily responds, to that he should allow it to respond.
Thomas Hardy’s Personal Writings (pp. 44–50), p. 49.

11 John R. Reed, *Victorian Conventions* (Ohio: Ohio Univ. Press, 1975).

... sought to strip mankind of ego by showing him as a pitiful figure in a vast, indifferent scene where accidents which once signified the consoling evidence of divine guidance now merely mocked human pride by engendering dismay and disappointment (*Victorian Conventions*, p. 139)

The short-circuiting process which links a text with a real-life author, who is presumed to “possess” a set of philosophical and metaphysical beliefs, has been magnified in recent years by an insistence on drawing ideological conclusions not only from overt philosophical comments, but also from the chosen plot itself. Irving Howe states that: 12

Where plot in Victorian fiction had often become little more than a means of providing a low order of suspense and complication, plot in Hardy's novels is supposed to signify, through its startling convolutions, a view of the human condition (*Thomas Hardy*, p. 90)

Hardy denied that he was a metaphysician and that he had any consistent philosophy to expound, and usually claimed that he was, if anything, an optimist (or meliorist) rather than a pessimist. When *Jude the Obscure* was attacked for its amorality and fatalism, he complained to William Archer:13

But my pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs, and that Ahriman is winning all along the line. On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist. What are my books but one plea against “man's inhumanity to man” — to woman — and to the lower animals? (*Real Conversations*, pp 46-47)

Hardy the man, as Virginia R Hyman points out,¹⁴ was more interested in ethics than metaphysics, and concerned to promote such simple qualities as altruism, like the great Victorian novelists before him.

But loving kindness is no subject for a critical volume. Readers of Hardy's own day, as of ours, find that, for better or worse, a large part of their experience of reading his texts may be described as philosophical detective work, an attempt to piece together scattered clues to form a coherent, connected whole. Although few readers reach the same “solution”, we still feel that a solution is there, somewhere embodied in the text. This is no more than to say that Hardy wrote successful tragedies. He generates a theme suspense which does not proceed to a firm solution in the way that plot enigmas are satisfactorily solved, so the reader's theme-suspense survives his completion of the text.

12 Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966).

13 William Archer, *Real Conversations* (London: Heinemann, 1904).

14 Virginia R. Hyman, *Ethical Perspective in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat, 1975), pp. 8-10.

Hardy was a Greek scholar long before he became a novelist and his conception of tragedy was guided initially by a careful reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* as he utilises a terminology of tragic theory largely derived from Aristotle.¹⁵ Aristotle picture tragedy as a single parabola, the hero's rise followed by his fall, and this pattern, although not slavishly copied in any of Hardy's texts, is the model behind his own variations. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, for example, may be described as a fall, followed by a rise, reaching a definite peripeteia on Tess's wedding night and a long fall.

Within this pattern, it is notable how much of Tess's philosophical commentary, often clumsily tacked on to the text, varies according to its position in the process. In the last sentence of Phase the Second, for instance, the reader shares Tess's rediscovery of hope:

It was unexpended youth, surging up anew after its temporary check, and bringing with it hope, and the inevitable instinct towards self-delight (xv, 128)

Any critic who claims to have found a consistent pattern in Hardy's philosophical pronouncements has to ignore the description of most of Tess's stay at Talbothays. Daniel Schwarz is one critic who claims to find nothing but pessimism in Hardy;¹⁶ but one may contrast his views, and those of many others, with Hardy's own philosophical exposition at this point in *Tess*:

The irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere, which pervades all life, from the meanest to the highest, had at length mastered Tess. Being even now only a young woman of twenty, one who mentally and sentimentally had not finished growing, it was impossible that any event should have left upon her an impression that was not in time capable of transmutation (xvi, 132)

There is nothing equivocal about the psychological truths expressed here, nor can there be much doubt that the *reader*, at this point, is expected to entertain considerable hopes that the story can and should

15 See, e.g., the first of the Outlines for Stories (*Old Mrs Chundle*, p. 117), composed in 1871. At the end of the story, a surprise is planned for the *reader* as the true narrative past is revealed:

The discovery first is that the 1st sweet heart here is *chere amie* of the old lady's husband – then that she is really wife: old lady poisons herself: man convicted: dies: girl marries other lover.

The use of "discovery" here seems to be a clear echo of the Aristotelian idea of anagnorisis (see p. 332, n. 42). The later Prefaces and essays contain various references to Aristotle and the principles of Greek tragedy.

16 "As a self-dramatising character who is a sceptical, gloomy, fatalistic presence, Hardy's narrator is an immanent presence whose pessimistic philosophical comments and bitterly ironic narration the reader feels on every page. Hardy creates a malevolent world in which characters live not in light which is good, but in moral darkness which is bad." Daniel R. Schwartz, "Beginings and Endings in Hardy's Major Fiction", *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 19.

end happily. *Jude the Obscure*, too, does not move towards an inevitably tragic ending, as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* does, because there are a number of upward peripeteiai, notably the moments when we feel sure that Sue really does love Jude.¹⁷

¹⁷ The most obvious occasion for optimism is the beginning of Part Fifth (V, i, 271), when the divorces of both Jude and Sue are completed in remarkably quick time.

(iii) Fostering the Sense of Causal Significance and the Peripeteia's Imminence

After the reunion of Henchard and Susan, early in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, there is no such period of hope for the reader, and the inevitability of the conclusion at every stage may make this a more oppressive reading experience. A number of plot “springs”, or threats, are established which the reader knows will eventually re-emerge to blight Henchard’s progress. A full two-thirds of the way through the text, one of the longest-lasting plot-springs or “sleepers”¹ is activated as the furmity-woman’s story becomes common knowledge. The narrator comments anxiously:

Small as the police-court incident had been in itself, it formed the edge or turn in the incline of Henchard’s fortunes. On that day — almost at that minute — he passed the ridge of prosperity and honour, and began to descend rapidly on the other side. It was strange how soon he sank in esteem (xxxix, 229)

The all-seeing *reader* is invited to stand back from the narrative and see the overall trajectory of which this incident is a part.

The problem is that it may be difficult to stimulate interest in each individual event if prospective suspense is eliminated by a knowledge of the overall pattern. The text would like the *reader* to see every incident as crucial, indeed as a turning-point, but this is difficult to arrange if there are no genuine upward turns. Artificial reinforcement of the level of apparent significance by such comments as the above is a tactic which is often exploited in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Since there are several incidents which destroy the public respect which Henchard has gained, and since the feelings of the populace have little direct influence on the final catastrophe, the allegations of the furmity-woman, far from forming the turning-point in the trajectory, are a comparatively insignificant disaster in the overall scheme. The passage implies that the text depicts a rise and fall, whereas the pattern is, more accurately, a decline and fall.

¹ See Bruce Merry, *Anatomy of the Spy Thriller* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1971). A *sleeper* is the standard term for the spy who is infiltrated into an enemy country, who lies low for a number of years, and is eventually *activated* by his superiors. Mistakes and weaknesses in the character of the tragic protagonist and inevitably exploited by the text at some point, and the *reader* anticipates that this will be so. A good example of the tragic *sleeper* is the secret which Tess cannot bring herself to tell Angel Clare. Sleepers create a sense of the imminence of a peripeteia, although it may be a long time before they are activated.

Another function of such quasi-significant commentary is to indicate to the *reader* that he is close to the thematic core of the work. If the reader feels that important ideological questions are at present being settled, his interest may be retained through the less exciting parts of the action. Often, this exploits the *reader's* lack of knowledge of how the plot will turn out. For instance, at a dull moment in Wilkie Collins's *Armadale*, Midwinter resolves to leave Thorpe-Ambrose, a decision which is less than crucial to the plot:²

With that resolution he left the room; and in leaving it, took the irrevocable step from Present to Future (II, xiii, 294).

Out of context, we can see that this is all but meaningless, but, for the reader who is caught up in the narrative continuum, such comments reinforce his sense of the imminence of the true peripeteia or catastrophe, or proximity to some thematic revelation.

At certain points in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy presents a more honest account of the narrative progression, and thereby pinpoints his own problems:

Ever since the evening of his wife's arrival with her daughter there had been something in the air which had changed his luck. That dinner at the King's Arms with his friends had been Henchard's Austerlitz: he had had his successes since, but his course had not been upward (xx, 155).

Austerlitz (1805) was the high point of Napoleon's fortunes, but for much of the text Hardy tries to escape the recognition that Henchard's Austerlitz or peripeteia is long past.

In this way, comments which impose an overall pattern, or indicate a meaning or causation behind the affairs of the immediate present, may be used to obscure the weak links in the plot and to strengthen our sense of causal connection. One of the weakest links in the tightly-bound causal sequence which leads to Henchard's tragedy is the decline in his business fortunes. Henchard makes two wrong guesses about the English weather and buys and sells grain at the wrong times. Eventually, it is clear that the harvest will not be a good one and the narrator comments:

If Henchard had only waited long enough he might at least have avoided loss though he had not made a profit. But the momentum of his character knew no patience. At this turn of the scales he remained silent. The movements of his mind seemed to tend to the thought that some power was working against him (xxvii, 204)

What is the cause of Henchard's financial failure? Is it his impatient character, or a set of celestial scales? Is Hardy suggesting that some

power is working against Henchard? Indeed, that is exactly what he wishes to suggest, without in any way committing himself to belief in a particular divinity. Hence the elaborate evasions of the last two lines; Hardy does not even dare to say that Henchard thought that some power was working against him, but tells us that the “movements” of his mind “seemed to tend” that way.

Most readers, however, will not remember the qualifications, only the final doom-laden suggestion. It is possible, at least, that Hardy goes to such lengths to suggest so great a variety of causes because he felt that this was the most arbitrary occurrence in the plot. Henchard’s financial decline might be seen as the result of chance, the caprice of the English weather, which Henchard was compelled to guess at by his chosen profession. In the real world, one feels, he might just as easily have won and Farfrae have lost. Hardy was unwilling to put any of his narrative events down to luck for the obvious reason that this would jeopardise our sense of retrospective destiny.

The popularity of melodrama in the Victorian period made it difficult for the author to resist the temptation to include episodes which are inessential to the causal interest. Hardy, like Collins, was happy to exploit the first-time reader’s ignorance in intimating that the present sensational episode will eventually form a crucial link in a much larger causal scheme. This is true of the guinea-gambling episode in *The Return of the Native*. It is difficult for the text to link this exciting set-piece with the narrative already read or yet to come. There is no skill whatsoever in gambling on the simple throw of a dice so there is no character causation which determines that Damon Wildeve should win all the guineas from Christian Cantle, nor that Diggory Venn should win them back again from Wildeve.

Yet the text contrives to convince us that the unflappable Venn is more likely to win than the “nervous and excitable” Wildeve (III, viii, 242). Even when Venn throws, at odds of 215 to one, three sixes to beat his opponent’s two sixes and a five, many will have been persuaded to feel that the game was not rigged by the *author*. After Venn has won all the guineas, the *reader* is given a proleptic glimpse of the fact that Venn makes a mistake when he gives all the guineas to Thomasin, whom he believes to be the rightful owner:

It had not been comprehended by the reddleman that at half-way through the performance the game was continued with the money of another person; and it was an error which afterwards helped to cause more misfortune than treble the loss in money value could have done (III, viii, 248).

Presumably, this refers to Mrs Yeobright’s death on her visit to Clym and Eustacia, and this comment reinforces our sense of a plausible causal sequence and prospective destiny at the impending tragedy.

But by the time Mrs Yeobright makes her fateful journey (IV, v), the misunderstanding over the guineas has been amicably explained to all interested parties except Clym. There could be any number of reasons why Mrs Yeobright should choose to visit her son, whom she has not seen for a long time, on this particular day, and there is no real need for the text to inflict retrospective blame on Christian, Wildeve and Venn. Despite the promise of significance to come in the tentative proleptic glimpse, the dice-throwing may finally be seen as a part of no significant causal chain. The superadded prospective destiny is somewhat unethical, exploiting the *reader's* lack of knowledge of the rest of the story.

The death of a protagonist, the focal point of every tragedy, is usually the result of a large number of "sleepers" (particularities of character, circumstance, the will of the gods etc.), established throughout the text, being activated simultaneously. The reader inevitably asks himself *why* that character had to die, and the multiplication of causes inevitably creates ambiguity and a residue of theme suspense. The tragic text will rarely emphasise one cause at the expense of all others, thus answering the implied question, but will remind the *reader* of as many underlying causes and sleepers as possible, as well as establishing new and more immediate causes.

Mrs Yeobright's death is typical of Hardyan tragedy in that as much responsibility as possible is inflicted on as many characters, especially sympathetic characters, as possible. Clym must take much of the blame for his rebellion against his mother's wishes, while Eustacia failed to open the door to her on a hot day. Wildeve is clearly also responsible, and even little Johnny failed to do anything about the woman he found in trouble. It is undoubtedly true that some part of the typical reader's pleasure in tragedy lies in this infliction of blame upon sympathetic and well-meaning characters, although it is not easy to determine why this should be so.

But plausibility demands that the negligence of various characters cannot be held directly responsible for the majority of fictional deaths; there must be some more tangible cause to be entered on the coroner's certificate. This has been a problem for tragedians of every period in that the actual trigger, or medical cause of death, tends to deflect attention from the underlying causes which are the subject of the tragedy and its *raison d'être*. In terms of verisimilitude, a broken heart is hardly sufficient, and some local (i.e. non-tragic) circumstance must actually trigger death, thus dispelling some of our sense of tragic causation and retrospective destiny. Old age, accident, and disease are the most common triggers of death in the world beyond the book, but they do not tend to reflect the causal chains established by the narrative.

Since tragic death must be as meaningful as possible, such local triggers are inevitably underplayed. In the case of Mrs Yeobright, the nominal causes are sunstroke, exhaustion and a poisoned foot. Presumably, the arbitrary snake-bite is included in the list because Hardy sensed that the other triggers would not be sufficient to achieve a plausible demise. yet it can be no more than a wound in the foot, lest too much responsibility for death should fall on such a random occurrence.

Just such an aesthetic dialectic, balancing trigger and long-term psychological determinants, trigger and cause, may be seen in the presentation of the deaths of most tragic heroes. The death of Richard Carstone in *Bleak House* is a good example in that the actual medical causes of death are hardly mentioned because they might detract from our sense of the determining significance of, for example, Chancery (and Vholes in particular), Richard's own character, his social expectations, etc. The death of Lucetta Templeman in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* also negotiates a compromise which may offend against a modern reader's sense of plausibility. Ideally, we would feel that Lucetta's death is caused by the skimmy ride in Casterbridge, which in turn results from her foolishness in love and that of Henchard, the latter's negligence in entrusting the letters to the grudge-bearing Jopp, Jopp's conduct in allowing the townsfolk to hear their contents, and the general unfeelingness of human nature, as reflected in the skimmy ride itself.³

When Lucetta sees the procession, she is afraid that her husband, Farfrae, who she does not know is away from home, will find out about her previous conduct, and she collapses to the ground in the paroxysms of an epileptic seizure (xxxix, 284). This is the young woman's only apparent medical disorder, yet we are presumably intended to understand that this is the primary trigger of her death many hours later. In the meantime, the text implicates Farfrae as well, because he does not return quickly enough to comfort his wife, and also Henchard who fails to convince Farfrae that he must come home. The result is that every major character must take part of the blame for Lucetta's tragedy,⁴ and the same may be said of Henchard's death at the end of the book.

Henchard also comes as close to dying of a broken heart, without further physiological specification, as verisimilitude will allow, and,

3 In the original, serialised version of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, a still more ingenious sequence is constructed in which the packet of letters passes through almost everyone's hands, thus spreading the blame as widely as possible.

4 The text even overcomes the problem of inflicting retrospective blame on Elizabeth-Jane. This is achieved in the cunningly constructed conversation between the two women in Chapter Thirty, when Elizabeth-Jane is unwittingly cruel to Lucetta.

naturally enough, the contributory causal strands extend right back to the beginning of the novel to achieve an overwhelming sense of retrospective destiny. A hierarchy of causes is inevitably created, however, according to their proximity to the final disaster. For maximum ironic effect, Hardy chooses to stress Elizabeth-Jane's as the most important contribution, since, apart from Henchard, she is the most sympathetic character in the narrative. Her harshness towards him when he appears at her wedding brings about the final depression,⁵ and, like Angel Clare, she cannot recover from her error until it is too late and must therefore bear a sense of guilt.

Since *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is first and foremost a tragedy, it is generically important that Henchard's death should occur as close to the end of the text as possible. There is a problem in that the sub-genre of romance also reaches fruition in the same pages, and the mood of the one is likely to conflict with the mood of, and our pleasure in, the other. Elizabeth-Jane, the most deserving of all the characters, despite being cast as Goneril to Henchard's Lear, is to marry Farfrae and live happily ever after. After her wedding, Elizabeth-Jane finds herself "in a latitude of warm weather" (xlv, 332), and this sense of peace-at-last is further suggested by the extraordinary last sentence:

And in being forced to class herself among the fortunate she did not cease to wonder at the persistence of the unforeseen, when the one to whom such unbroken tranquillity had been accorded in the adult stage was she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain (xlv, 332-33).

The last four words are inevitably the ones that remain in the reader's memory, and may take the place of a conclusion to the structures of theme-suspense. For those critics who wish to prove that Hardy is a pessimist, it is advisable to quote only the last part of this sentence, for instance, Schwarz:⁶

The novel concludes by the narrator presenting the views of someone who has experienced disappointment, and who because of this will accept willingly whatever comes her way since she felt, "happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (p. 26).

This is part of Schwarz's attempt to show that Elizabeth-Jane's viewpoint is very different from the narrator's, and that we should be critical of her illusory happiness. But, if anything, the reverse is true. Her youthful experience had persuaded her to class herself among the unfortunate of this world, but now new experience "forced" her to take a more positive view, to relinquish her pessimism, and to accept the unbroken tranquillity which she had found. The view of life as a

5 See esp., *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, xlv, 325-26.

6 See p. 362, n. 33.

“general drama of pain” is the one that she has had to discard. Yet it is no accident that Hardy should structure his concluding sentence in this tortuous fashion, leaving the most negative clause until the end. His organisational problem, as he amalgamates finally the very different worlds of tragedy and romance, and the philosophical views which are appropriate to each, is thus encapsulated in the confusion of these last six lines.

(iv) Tactics of Deauthorisation and Other Types of Theme Suspense

Victorian novels are full of coincidences, and it is inevitable that the reader will alight on those coincidences in his attempt to identify the causal principles which underlie a narrative and presumably reflect an author's philosophy. On the day that Henchard at last tells Elizabeth-Jane that she is his own daughter, he also discovers that she is Newson's daughter after all. It is possible to argue that this reflects Hardy's belief in a divinity with a black sense of humour. I would prefer to argue that the main function of this coincidence is to give the *reader*, rather than some malicious President of the Immortals, a certain degree of ironic pleasure, as is true of most narrative coincidences. The timing of these two events is certainly not essential to the rest of the plot (Henchard could have made the discovery at any subsequent juncture). Hardy steps briefly into his protagonist's mind: "he could not help thinking that the concatenation of events this evening had produced was the scheme of some sinister intelligence bent on punishing him" (xix, 147). Here there is a hint of authorisation in the first few words, but there is in fact little reliable indication of the *author's* views on the truth of the thoughts which Henchard could not avoid.

Similar techniques of deauthorisation may be seen in the typically perspectival description of Susan Henchard at the beginning of the text:

When she plodded on in the shade of the hedge, silently thinking, she had the hard, half-apatetic expression of one who deems anything possible at the hands of Time and Chance except, perhaps, fair play. The first phase was the work of Nature, the second probably of civilisation. (i, 38).

Looking closely, we can see that the whole of the second half of the sentence is qualified to the point of non-significance by the first half. On this occasion, we are not even being told what the character thought, but what her expression suggested she might be thinking. Hardy's personifications of Time and Chance, Nature and Civilisation, suggest vast significances to be explored in the novel we are about to read, but, in fact, they do not refer to any coherent philosophical odyssey.¹

In *The Woodlanders*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*, there is a clear development of tactics in the development of theme suspense. In these texts, it is much rarer that the narrator steps inside the action and labels it according to some overall pattern, as is so often

¹ The personification of Chance suggested by the capitalization seems particularly inapposite because it appropriates one of the few words in the language which expresses purposelessness, the absence of motive or pattern.

the case in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Instead, most of the comments which carry a high level of philosophical resonance are couched in direct speech. Jude, for example, attempts to sum up his own tragedy: "I was, perhaps, after all, a paltry victim to the spirit of mental and social restlessness, that makes so many unhappy in these days!" (VI, i, 336). If, despite the "perhaps", we choose to accept this as a fair summary of the meaning of the tragedy, we do so without any assurance that this is part of the authorial intention.

Hardy was well aware that this gave him a much better defence against the type of critic who assumed he could discover Hardy the person from a reading of his novels. In his essay on "The Profitable Reading of Fiction" (1888),² Hardy shows himself aware of the defensive possibilities of this tactic:

A philosophy which appears between the inverted commas of a dialogue may, with propriety, be as full of holes as a sieve if the person or persons who advance it gain any reality of humanity thereby (Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings, p. 116).

In other words, it hardly matters what the philosophy is as long as it is there, increasing the *reader's* involvement in the narrative.³

When a protagonist, such as Jude, attempts to place his own experience within a causal sequence, the reader generally feels a slight increase in sympathy for the character involved, even though his speculations may not correspond to the reader's own beliefs, if only because the character is approaching his situation with the same interest as we are bestowing on the text. We may compare hypotheses such as these on the level of theme to the mystery solutions proffered by Cytherea and others in *Desperate Remedies*.⁴ Each encourages us to reflect on the action we have witnessed or the text we have read so that we may determine to what degree a particular causal scheme fits the evidence.

Vast metaphysical speculations are only one aspect of theme suspense, and there are a number of other thematic structures in Hardy's work which are by no means so open-ended. Indeed, many are as carefully delineated and closed as the plot itself. Insofar as the reader's thematic interest is his attempt to discern the connections between discrete events, it is difficult to make a clear cut distinction between that and

2 "The Profitable Reading of Fiction" was 1st pub. in *Forum* (New York), March 1888, pp. 57–70. It is reprinted in *Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings*, pp. 110–24.

3 In *The Woodlanders*, e.g., Fitzpiers and Mrs Charmond discuss their past acquaintance, and Fitzpiers expresses the view that: "But see how powerless is the human will against predestination! We were prevented meeting; we have met" (xxvi, 210). Or, towards the conclusion, Grace is not prepared to put her experiences down to simple good fortune: "O, Edred, there has been an Eye watching over us tonight, and we should be thankful indeed" (xlvii, 366).

4 *Desperate Remedies*, xvii, 322.

his plot-interest. Whenever a textual motif, whether of plot, characterisation, imagery, or symbol, is repeated in similar (or even antithetical) form at another point in the text, in such a way that the similarity maybe recognised by the reader, a minor thematic anagnorisis may be said to take place.

Hardy's texts are designed to maximise the number of possible connections that may be made by the average reader. David Lodge summarises accurately the kind of novel at which Hardy was aiming:⁵

Hardy's development as a novelist ... was directed towards a mode of writing in which every scene, gesture and image would function simultaneously on several different levels: as a vivid and precise imitation of actuality, as a link in a chain of causation, as symbolic action and as part of a formal pattern of parallels, contrasts and correspondences.

The Hardyan text invites a reading similar to that bestowed on the Bible by medieval exegesis, considering the text on a number of self-referential levels, finding the seeds of the whole system in the most minute individual manifestation.⁶

The death (iv, 57) of Prince in *Tess*, for example, not only suggests the tenor of the narrative to come, but employs a number of specific motifs which will recur in other episodes of the book.⁷ This forward-reference [adumbration (not prefiguration)] may be said to correspond to the level of anagogical [typological] significance in the Bible.⁸

Particularities of the Hardyan scene function as nexal indicators for the shrewd reader;⁹ indeed there are very few details in the later texts which may *not* be said to function as clues about the future development of the narrative. Clearly, this is most appropriate in the

5 David Lodge, Introduction to *The Woodlanders*, p. 14.

The most interesting study of the function of repetition in Hardy's novels and others is that of Joseph Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), chapters five and six.

6 The idea of the different levels of scriptural exegesis dates back to such early theologians as Thomas Aquinas, and is repeated by almost every theorist into the middle ages. A selection of these writings is to be found in *Readings in Medieval Literature*, ed. Joseph M. Miller, Michael H. Prosser, and Thomas W. Benson (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973). The four levels are traditionally reckoned to be the actual, the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical.

7 Those motifs include redness (blood), penetration, blindness, unconsciousness, the journey towards death, darkness, and invisibility.

8 The anagogical level of the Bible is its reference forward to events which have not yet taken place, e.g., (in the Old Testament), the coming of the Messiah, the Final Judgement and life after death.

The most fruitful consideration of the significance of this for literary criticism is that of Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979).

9 See p. 331, n. 25.

development of genres whose endings do not carry a high level of surprise. If the reader understands the clues of repetitions, he will feel less prospective suspense or uncertainty at the outcome of the basic plot.

Beyond the simple expedient of identifying repetitive patterns, it remains difficult for the critic to identify a coherent thematic exposition which is comparable to the gradual unfolding of the plot. We cannot usually locate a specific starting point (the establishment of the thematic enigma), the suggestion of possible answers and false leads, reaching a conclusion which enables us to understand preceding thematic material. Much of the problem lies in the convention of the consistent narrator who is allowed to retain plot-information for as long as he chooses, but who finds it more difficult to avoid giving a sense of his values, in order to create a surprise at the conclusion.¹⁰

Despite such difficulties, the novel of ideas rather than plot has been generally popular over the last hundred years, a type of text which aims to retain its *reader's* curiosity by withholding ideas rather than plot-information.

The texts of James, Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf, and Forster himself convince the *reader* that some secret wisdom lies at the heart of the darkness in which the *reader* often moves, and they try, to varying degrees, to suggest that a conclusion has been reached, that the secret has been found. If the narrator/author abandons his priestly robes and admitted that he had no secret to share, many modern plotless texts would lose their interest for readers in search of new meanings. In one sense at least, the modern novel of ideas is a curiously Victorian enterprise, relying on an assumption that an individual (the author) is capable of comprehending the world in which he lives, making sense of his experience for the benefit of others.

Hardy stands at a transitional point between the Victorian novel, with its strong reliance on plot and character, and the modern novel of ideas. Much of his continued popularity may stem from his ability to combine both types of narrative. In the course of his novelistic career, he perfected the traditional form of tragedy, gradually abandoning the structures of mystery and retrospective suspense which were so popular among Hardy's contemporaries. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and more particularly in *Tess* and *Jude*, the reader is given all the information he needs about the narrative present, so that he can enjoy

10 In *Pride and Prejudice*, e.g., there is an attempt to withhold clear moral indications on the questions suggested by the title, if only because specification of the author's stance on these issues would allow us to identify the hero prematurely. But it cannot be said that *Pride and Prejudice* succeeds in persuading us that the *author* holds a set of views which are the reverse of the final position.

to the full the causal or thematic suspense which is his major pleasure in the form. While Hardy mastered his chosen form, the problems encountered by Conrad as he sought to develop structures of plot suspense and theme suspense were not to be so easily surmounted.

Plot Suspense and Theme Suspense in Conrad's Major Fiction

(i) Incomplete Structures of Theme Suspense

In *Heart of Darkness*,¹ Marlow relates that, some forty miles from the Inner Station, he came across a hut and, inside it, a book, *An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*. The book itself is dull but there are some intriguing notes in the margin:

"I couldn't believe my eyes! They were in cipher! Yes, it looked like cipher. Fancy a man lugging with him a book of that description into this nowhere and studying it — and making notes — in cipher at that! It was an extravagant mystery" (p.99)

Marlow cannot understand the notes at all, yet he finds it extremely difficult to discontinue reading it. The bathetic solution to the "extravagant mystery" is simple enough; the notes are in Russian and were written with no intent to conceal. Once the key is known there is no longer a mystery.

1 References to Conrad's novels are to the standard Everyman edition (London: Dent, 1974), ed. Norman Sherry, insofar as the series was reprinted in that year. The dates of first publication of the texts mentioned in this chapter are as follows:

- 1898 *Tales of Unrest* (including "The Idiots" and "An Outpost of Progress") (1947, with *Almayer's Folly: a Story of an Eastern River*; 1st pub. 1895).
- 1900 *Lord Jim* (1974)
- 1902 *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether* (1974) (completed June 1898, Feb. 1899, and Oct. 1902, respectively)
- 1904 *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (1974)
- 1907 *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* (1974)
- 1911 *Under Western Eyes* (1974)
- 1913 *Chance: A Tale in Two Parts* (1949)
- 1915 *Victory: an Island Tale* (1948)
- 1915 *Within the Tides: Tales* (including "The Planter of Malata") (1950, with *The Shadow-Line: a Confession*; 1st pub. 1917)
- 1920 *The Rescue: a Romance of the Shallows* (1949)
- 1923 *A Set of Six* (including "Gaspar Ruiz" and "The Informer") (1954)

In turn, nearly every critic of Conrad has responded to his texts as if they were a codified embodiment of a philosophy or set of ideas. Once the code is cracked, the magic password found, the treasure will be revealed for all to see. Indeed, most critics claim to have found the secret principle, the formula which takes us to the heart of Conrad's thinking.² The principles of fidelity, truth, activity, solidarity and integrity, amongst others, have been suggested as primary values, and phrases may be easily drawn from the *Preface to The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* to support most theses. But Conrad's ideas, in themselves, are not especially difficult or esoteric in the way that Yeats's cosmology, for example, is difficult. It is a measure of the failure, or rather reluctance, of Conrad's novels to impress their themes and ideas on the reader that so many critical volumes have been addressed to the task of exegesis.

Few critics have considered the possibility that Conrad, like Hardy, may not have been trying to express one coherent set of views and may even have been doing his best to *prevent* his works from being appropriated by a single ideology. In this chapter, I shall consider some of the aspects of thematic indeterminacy. The structure of theme-suspense in each of Conrad's texts promises a resolution, and continually assures the *reader* that he is moving a little closer to the desired anagnorisis, yet never quite provides the reader with the answer that he hoped for. There is no overt admission that the theme suspense structure has been left open, and the reader is often left with the impression that the truth was revealed but that it was too profound for him to understand.

In this respect, Conrad is not so very different from the novelists who succeeded him. But there is another Conrad, the Conrad of the nineteenth century, and it is his strong connection with the old century which makes his fiction a fitting conclusion to our study. Conrad was primarily influenced in his own novel-writing by the novels of his Victorian predecessors, especially Dickens. In his own writing, Conrad wavered uncertainly between the two extremes of the machine plot and the absurdist plot, between a narrative in which every motif or event is imbued with significance and a narrative in which separate units offer only hollow or contradictory meanings.

Today the average reader still expects narrative to be meaningful, to provide a resolution to the plot structures and theme structures that it develops. But there is at least an audience, albeit small, which has abandoned its nineteenth century preconceptions about the function of narrative. This was not the case at the turn of the century and Conrad, as a professional novelist who was continually short of money,³ was

2 e.g., Robert Caserio, who divulges the "secret theme" of *The Secret Agent, Plot, Story, and the Novel, from Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 269.

3 See, esp., Watt, p. 128.

under great pressure to provide the traditional pleasures of plot suspense and resolution. In his later years he did not choose to resist that pressure, but we will consider those novels in which he attempted a compromise between the novel that he knew and the novel he would like to write.

The essence of the compromise lies in the creation of a traditional suspense structure that reaches no more than a partial resolution.⁴ On the various overlapping levels of plot, character, and theme, such suspense does not appear to be markedly different from that of the classic realist text, insofar as it promises significances to come and the eventual establishment of a pattern. But whereas a Beckett would make the eventual bathos inescapable, forcing the *reader* to realise that his expectations of a resolution have been frustrated, Conrad is a master of the quasi-resolution. He negotiates a precarious outcome, a conclusion which will satisfy one type of nineteenth century reader, but, almost parenthetically, indicates the degree to which the questions could never be satisfactorily answered. Beckett's texts may be more "honest", but Conrad's allow us to continue our search after the conclusion of the reading and thus they retain their enigmatic allure.

For all the inescapability of the ironies to today's critic, the average contemporary reader of *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard* would have experienced little difficulty in interpreting the conclusion as a fairly traditional tragedy. Yet every critic assumes that it is intended to be deliberately ironic, achieving bathos rather than pathos. Nostromo, we say, has been turned into a social outcast because of his love of the silver buried on the Great Isabel. We are not invited to feel that Nostromo's feeling of "love" for Giselle results from anything other than weakness and emotional immaturity, nor is she apparently worth the trouble that he takes.

Through extensive manipulation of the plot, it is argued, Conrad brings his desired ironies into sharp focus at the moment when Nostromo's world collapses. The magnificent Capataz is shot by his surrogate father, who loves him, because Viola believes that it is Ramirez [ironically N's protégé] come to steal Giselle from him. But in truth, Nostromo has come to steal Giselle as well as the silver. As old Viola says: "Like a thief he came, and like a thief he fell" (III, xiii, 554). So far, we enjoy the completeness of the hard-worked ironies.

But Nostromo dies very slowly, and he is allowed a demise which has many of the conventional trappings of the heroic and tragic. He has time to tell Giselle: "It seemed as though I could not live through the night without seeing thee once more — my star, my little flower" (III,

4 e.g. Dr Monygham's comment to *Nostromo*.

xiii, 554). We might be tempted to treat the use of archaic, stylised language here as parodic except that Linda, like the equally un-English Jewel,⁵ lapses into similar archaic second-person pronouns in the final moments of emotional intensity.⁶ Nostromo is able to relieve himself of part of his burden of remorse, and to come to terms with his failure, in his final interview with Mrs Gould, achieving partial self-awareness for the first time in the novel. Thus his last moments more than resemble the crucial recognition of Aristotelian tragic theory.

There is an element of bathos at the actual moment of death, with a ridiculous photographer ["like a hunchbacked monkey"] the only person present, begging for money and asking if Dr Monygham, as he himself had predicted,⁷ is really an enemy of the people. But *Nostromo* closes on Linda's overwhelming despair, and the text implies that she will never find peace of mind again:

It was another of Nostromo's triumphs, the greatest, the most enviable, the most sinister of all. In that true cry of undying passion that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver, the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores dominated the dark gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love (III, xiii, 566)

These last sentences apparently run counter to the underlying logic of the rest of the text, which has generally demonstrated that Nostromo himself has become the feeble victim and conquest of the treasure and of romantic infatuation, not a great triumph but a dismal defeat. Yet it is unreasonable to surmise that these lines are intended to be read ironically; the prose shows Conrad at his most majestic and convincing, and we are almost persuaded to believe that the "genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores" did dominate the dark gulf. The potential irony is unresolved because there is no further text in which resolutions can take place. The voice is lost with no clear indications of a prevailing discourse.

5 *Lord Jim*, xlv, 304.

6 *Nostromo*, III, xiii, 566.

7 Dr Monygham predicts that "a word from the great Fidanza may be quite enough to send some fool's knife into my back" (*Nostromo*, III, xi, 518).

(ii) Suicide and the Problem of Closure

In his extra-fictional writings, Conrad reveals himself as an advocate of a traditional sense of narrative closure.¹ But, in *Lord Jim*, we see the opposite effect, as a potentially tragic conclusion is undermined by the narrator's comments. Jim is, as Watt points out,² the only hero of a major twentieth-century novel to die for his honour, but Marlow does not apparently feel a great deal of sympathy.

The traditional functions of the Chorus at the conclusion of a tragedy are to bring out the hero's qualities in a moving epitaph, to regret his death, and to stress its inevitability (thus increasing retrospective destiny). Marlow does exactly the reverse, reminding us of Jim's faults rather than his virtues, picturing his death as a deliberate attempt at self-glorification, and stressing the selfishness of his arbitrary decision:

“And that's the end. He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic. Not in the wildest days of his boyish visions could he have seen the alluring shape of such an extraordinary success! ... He goes away from a living woman to celebrate his pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct. Is he satisfied — quite, now, I wonder?” (xiv, 306-07)

Most of this seems unfair to Jim. Since Marlow has stressed the sordid details of this last episode, it is difficult to see Jim's self-sacrifice in a tiny jungle village as a calculated success. Death can give retrospective meaning and purpose to life, but Jim's death, which will go unnoticed by his peer group, does not give ostensible direction or form to his existence.³

Suicide provides a reasonable end to a tragedy as long as we feel that the decision to die is an understandable response to the situation in which the hero finds himself. We do not find it unacceptable that Lady Dedlock or Michael Henchard should (effectively) take their own lives, for example. So why does the text of *Lord Jim* invite us to conclude that Jim has made an unreasonable decision, that he could have chosen to live happily ever after? If we look a little deeper, the answer to this question takes us to the heart of Conrad's problem. At an approximate estimate, there are fourteen suicides in Conrad's fiction, if we include

1 e.g., in his comments on James in his *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent, 1949; 1st pub. 1921), Conrad says that the desire for finality is, perhaps, the “only true desire of mankind” (pp. 18-19).

2 Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 356.

3 Even Marlow, who is as close to Jim as anyone, does not hear the news of Jim's death until long after the event. Jim performs his final self-sacrifice in front only of the inhabitants of the obscure village of Patusan.

Jim's own demise.⁴ Many of these suicides have a number of the generic hallmarks of tragedy, notably a strong sense of causal necessity, the self-recognition achieved by the protagonist, and the sympathy which the *reader* is asked to feel for him.

Possibly the most memorable, and indeed tragic, of all Conrad's suicides is that of Martin Decoud in *Nostromo*. The reader senses that Decoud is one of the most autobiographical of Conrad's characters, constructed from experiences of a personal kind. Decoud comes alive for the reader while so many of the other figures in *Nostromo* are, in a sense, too figurative, no more than ideas, possibilities. Decoud's love, Antonia Avellaños, is, Conrad admits,⁵ based on a girl that he himself once loved, while Decoud's incisive and brilliant speeches cut through the same illusions that the novel as a whole undermines more obtusely. Conrad himself had once attempted suicide,⁶ and, during the black days that he spent writing *Nostromo*, he must often have felt that life was quite grim enough to justify such attempts, that the decision not to live could be quite rationally made.⁷

But Conrad was always aware of his readers and critics and was conscious of a need that he should not be seen to advocate suicide as a valid response to the difficulties of existence. Conrad's texts, unlike Hardy's, invite a reading which attempts to identify the author himself (not simply the implied *author*) through his writing,⁸ He and the perspicacious reader of *Nostromo* might well identify a conflict in the author's mind between the subconscious desire to justify Decoud's suicide and the need to thwart that desire at all costs, at least on a conscious, rhetorical level.

Hence the often-noted disparity between the commentary on Decoud's character and actions and the speeches and actions themselves. As a

4 The other thirteen suicides are those of Peyrol in *The Rover*, Kayerts ("An Outpost of Progress"), Decoud, Whalley (*The End of the Tether*), Renouard ("The Planter of Malata"), Heyst (*Victory*), Susan ("The Idiots"), Brierly, Winnie Verloc, Erminia ("Gaspar Ruiz"), Sevrin ("The Informer"), De Barral (*Chance*), and Jorgensen (*The Rescue*). See C.B. Cox, *Joseph Conrad and the Question of Suicide* (Manchester: The John Rylands Univ. Library of Manchester, 1973), p. 288.

5 "If anything could induce me to revisit Sulaco (I should hate to see all these changes) it would be Antonia. And the true reason for that – why not be frank about it? – the true reason is that I have modelled her on my first love" (Author's Note to *Nostromo*, pp. xxi–xxii).

6 See Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 11–14.

7 See, esp., Norman Sherry's Introduction to *Nostromo* (London: Dent, 1974). Sherry records that Conrad commented to R.B. Cunningham-Graham that he was "dying over that cursed Nostromo thing" (p. v). [see letters from JC 1895–1924 ed. E. Garnett London 1928. e.g., p. 142 (1898). In late May 1898, C's friends had become concerned about his sanity. Also pp. 152–3, which sounds like Decoud about to commit suicide.]

8 *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, e.g., was, Conrad said, "my first consciously-planned attempt to render the truth of a phrase of life in the terms of my own temperament with all the sincerity of which I was capable" (Last Essays, p. 138). Hardy was much less willing to link his novels to his own personal experience. See p. 361, n. 27.

rule, Conrad rarely gives straightforward Victorian-style introductions in his own voice, preferring other, more indirect, methods of presentation, but he makes an exception for Decoud.

Before Decoud is allowed to say a word, the narrator tells us that the high regard which Sulaco has for the man is not justified:

As a matter of fact, he was an idle boulevardier, in touch with some smart journalists, made free of a few newspaper offices, and welcomed in the pleasure haunts of pressmen. This life, whose dreary superficiality is covered by the glitter of universal blague, like the stupid clowning of a harlequin by the spangles of a motley costume, induced in him a Frenchified — but most un-French — cosmopolitanism, in reality a mere barren indifferentism posing as intellectual superiority" (II, iii, 152)

These are harsh words indeed, suggesting Conrad's own anxiety to forestall the impression that he himself expresses a "mere barren indifferentism". The description of this "nondescript dilettante" (p. 153) continues in the narrator's own voice: "He had pushed the habit of universal raillery to a point where it blinded him to the genuine impulses of his own nature" (p. 153).

But how far does Conrad push the habit of universal raillery in his fiction, we may ask? There are not many positive values which he allows to stand unchallenged, unexposed as illusions. There is little evidence of all these faults in Decoud's subsequent actions. Rather than remaining inactive, he immediately decides to bring out, single-handedly, a thrice-weekly news-sheet [the *Parvenir*] and, in general, does rather more than any of the other characters to counteract the threat of invasion by revolutionary troops. We are told at the outset that Decoud is "disdainful" of Antonia (II, iii, 155), but this too is not borne out by the subsequent text.⁹

As well as capturing our interest on a romantic level, Decoud carries our more specific plot hopes in his attempt with Nostromo to save the silver of the mine from the clutches of Sotillo and the Monteros. The journey across the Golfo Placido in the lighter loaded with silver is, arguably, the central event of the novel and, through most of it, Decoud, rather than the title character, is [for the most part] the centre of consciousness. The arduous trip coincides with his spiritual crisis, and we fear for his safety:

He had had no rest, very little food, no pause in the stress of his thoughts and his feelings. Even his love for Antonia, whence he drew his strength

9 Any reader brought up on the nineteenth-century novel feels an automatic sympathy for the young, intelligent man deeply in love, and Decoud's love for Antonia stands out, for the reader, like an oasis in the barren desert of Sulaco society. Decoud's vulnerability and tenderness are more noticeable than his disdain.

and his inspiration, had reached the point of tragic tension during their hurried interview by Don José's bedside ... He imagined the lighter sinking to the bottom with an extraordinary shudder of delight. "I am on the verge of delirium," he thought (II, vii, 266).

This passage, and several others like it, function retrospectively as a justification for Decoud's desire to commit suicide and, perhaps unwittingly, Conrad accomplishes this task far more convincingly than in the confused ending of *Lord Jim*. We are made to feel the terrible stillness of the Placid Gulf, and later the crushing isolation of his existence on the *Great Isabel*. His love is apparently unrequited, and he faces likely death if he attempts to return to Sulaco. *Nostromo* has let him down and the whole world seems to be against him.

Somewhat crudely, the reader is kept in the simplest possible type of suspense for over two hundred pages (in the standard Everyman edition) as the text refuses to tell us what has become of brilliant Son Decoud. Eventually, Conrad returns to the *Great Isabel* and reveals that Decoud has committed suicide, establishing the most important cause as solitude. If Decoud had had a proper faith in himself, it is implied, rather than his alleged cynical carelessness, he would not have died:

Solitude from mere outward condition of existence becomes very swiftly a state of soul in which the affectations of irony and scepticism have no place (III, x, 497)

If we learn anything from Conrad's writing as a whole, it is that irony and scepticism are the most reasonable responses to the human predicament, but here we are to accept that they are no more than affectations.

The text oscillates between a firm detachment from Decoud's fate and an acknowledgement of the character's true meaning for the author. The discussion of solitude continues in the following fashion:

It takes possession of the mind, and drives forth the thought into the exile of utter unbelief. After three days of waiting for the sight of some human face, Decoud caught himself entertaining a doubt of his own individuality. It had merged into the world of cloud and water, of natural forces and forms of nature. In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part. (III, x, 498).

In the whole of Conrad's fiction, there is hardly a more pessimistic and despairing suggestion than this last sentence, yet it occurs in what starts as a critique of Decoud and the risks of scepticism.

We must conclude that the narrative is out of control at this point, that Decoud has indeed achieved an existence independent of Conrad's

rhetical intentions. But Conrad recovers his poise and renews his attack on the hapless Costaguanero:

The vague consciousness of a misdirected life given up to impulses whose memory left a bitter taste in his mouth was the first moral sentiment of his manhood (III, x, 498).

The few pages that describe Decoud's last days are representative of a conflict which may be seen in every one of Conrad's works, between the desire to justify the most extreme pessimism (specifically, to justify to himself his own attempted suicide), and to maintain a coherent structure of theme suspense, a suspense which relies on an implicit promise that there is something positive to be said, some affirmation that can be made. Like Decoud, Conrad may see himself as a "victim of the disillusioned weariness which is the retribution meted out to intellectual audacity" (III, x, 501), but he cannot permit himself to admit so much in his fiction.

(iii) Chronological “Looping” and the Ostensible Disregard of Plot Suspense

On the level of plot, Conrad faces the dilemma that he would like to show how all activity is finally illusory and futile, that, however we struggle, we are the victims of various impersonal forces, destructive or entropic. Yet he feels the pressure of a public who like plots to have purpose and direction. The author who aspired both to popularity and lasting critical favour tended to find himself denying that he was creating a traditional structure of plot suspense while actually continuing to provide that pleasure. Conrad manages this by a number of means, notably the alterations of normal chronological order and the refusal to describe his more sensational episodes directly.

In theory, we would presume that a distortion of the normal order of telling a story would inevitably destroy the larger part of the prospective suspense that the story, normally told, would create.

This is exactly the message which Conrad intends to convey by his use of the device: “look, I have succeeded in holding your attention without recourse to the tired old devices of prospective suspense. I refuse to exploit the advantage of knowing something (the plot) which the reader wishes to discover.”

This, it seems to me, is the true explanation for the distortion of normal order. Antony Price offers a number of other possible justifications for what he calls “chronological looping”,¹ but shows that *Nostromo* gains little or nothing from the method according to the possible objectives that he identifies. There are no compensatory gains in terms of our ability to understand theme or character, no advantages of ironic perspective. The technique of chronological looping is employed more often to create mystery than certainty.

Conrad is simply not willing to give away the crucial peripeteiai of his narratives in advance. In *Nostromo*, we are not given any indicatives that Sulaco will succeed in its quest for secession and independence until III, x, 474, some five-sixths of the way through the text.

1 Antony Price, “Chronological Looping” in *Nostromo* (Kuala Lumpur: Univ. of Malaya Library, 1973).

We do not learn that Decoud dies until III, x, 496, or that Nostromo dies until III, xiii, 563.² These events conclude the three major plot suspense structures of the book, and all minor plot-concerns also reach a conclusion in this last section. Thus the reader *does* keep reading because he wants to know what happens.

Furthermore, the reader feels that it *matters* whether Sulaco achieves its objectives; he is not given the sense that all decisions made will finally be futile. There would be little incentive to continue reading if the reader felt that this was the case. Yet most critics have inferred that Conrad wishes to show us that history is not a succession of crises, clearly defined causes and effects, but an evanescent and irretrievable collection of inconsequential events. Conrad's satire of man's attempts to capture history in narrative form may gradually be seen, we are told, in Captain Mitchell's stumbling and comic summary, rambling clumsily from one unspecified "epoch-marking" land mark to another. But Mitchell's narrative does not ramble clumsily; every part of it is carefully contrived so that Mitchell does not reveal anything at all of any significance. Minor details, insignificant in themselves, are revealed sparingly.

In the second prolepsis to his sample reminiscences,³ Captain Mitchell refers to Nostromo's part in Ribiera's successful trip to safety across the mountains. Since we have little idea of the context of this journey at this stage, the revelation tells us little. The next part of Mitchell's summary is itself summarised by the text:

But this event, creditable to Nostromo, was to lead immediately to another, which could not be classed either as "history" or as "a mistake" in Captain Mitchell's phraseology. He had another word for it.

"Sir," he used to say afterwards, "that was no mistake. It was a fatality. A misfortune, pure and simple, sir. And that poor fellow of mine was right in it — right in the middle of it! A fatality, if ever there was one — and to my mind he has never been the same man since." (I, viii, 130-31)

Even with hindsight, it is difficult to be sure what Mitchell is talking about here. Presumably, he is referring to the lighter trip and to the supposed drowning of Decoud, but Mitchell's description is so vague that it is difficult even to be sure of this. For the first-time reader, this passage (the conclusion to Part First) will create nothing but confusion and the annoying realisation that he has not fully understood the text.

2 We do know from III, x, 478, that Decoud is still presumed dead in this indefinite future time, because a marble medallion which commemorates him is one of the landmarks on Mitchell's sight-seeing tour. But he is assumed to have gone down with the lighter, so the reader will not feel sure that he is dead.

3 See p. 332, n. 36.

Mitchell's recollections, which occupy a minute proportion of the text, do tend indirectly to reduce human endeavour to a state [in the direction] of insignificance, but such an anti-novelistic perspective is rarely encouraged by the rest of the text. We feel, for instance, that the success of the mission to escape with the lighter full of silver is crucial to Sulaco's fortunes. Even in retrospect, we suspect that, if the silver had fallen into the hands of the enemy, all would have been lost.

Later, when Dr Monygham tries to persuade Nostromo to ride to Cayta to bring back Sulaco's crack regiment, we are left in no doubt that this is a moment of crucial importance. Nostromo is hostile to the doctor, and we doubt whether he will accept the dangerous task:

But Dr Monygham had no mind to quarrel with Nostromo. At this supremely critical moment of Sulaco's fortunes it was borne upon him at last that this man was really indispensable, more indispensable than ever the infatuation of Captain Mitchell, his proud discoverer, could conceive ... (III, ix, 452).

This creates straightforward prospective suspense, exploiting an underlying assumption that moment-to-moment personal confrontations will have a significant influence on the outcome, as in most Victorian novels. Indeed, in the plot that Conrad has chosen, they do; if Nostromo had not journeyed to Cayta, the struggle would presumably have been lost.

But was the struggle worth winning? Most critics have assumed that Sulaco faces a "choice of nightmares", like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*,⁴ forced to succumb either to the revolutionary forces of the Montero brothers or to its own material interests. In retrospect, some readers may see this as a choice between the frying pan and the fire but, as we read *Nostromo* for the first time, we find it very easy to take sides in the struggle. All the sympathetic characters (Nostromo, Decoud, Dr Monygham, and the Goulds) are on one side, [even if they do have to enlist Hernandez] and the least sympathetic (Sotillo, in particular) on the other. It seems to be a straightforward melodramatic choice between white and black, as in all good nineteenth-century adventures. Even afterwards, it is by no means clear that Sulaco's new position is to be considered as less than satisfactory. Dr Monygham voices some often-quoted criticisms of the "material interests"⁵ but we are not told enough about the new Occidental Republic to judge whether his criticisms are fair. If the *reader* is intended to feel disillusionment at the outcome, it is by no means obvious from the text.

4 *Heart of Darkness*, p. 138.

5 Dr Monygham tells Mrs Gould: "There is no peace and no rest in the development of material interests. They have their law and their justice. But it is founded on expediency, and is inhuman; it is without rectitude, without the continuity and the force that can be found only in a moral principle" (III, xi, 511).

In short, Conrad cannot bear to deprive his reader of his hard-won victory.

In *Nostromo*, Conrad chooses to exploit a non-linear presentation, and yet, at every turn in the second half, the text tries to recover the advantages of linear presentation, notably a unified sense of narrative present,⁶ and a large measure of prospective suspense. But, in doing this, the text inevitably sacrifices the potential advantages of the method. In theory, if the *reader* is told the end of the story in advance, and then shown how that end-position was reached, he will be much better placed to understand the ironies and the gap between intentions and effects, between expectations and achievements, between surface appearances and deeper truths.

In other words, he may become a second-time reader on a first reading, and the textual yield on a thematic level will be much higher. This would seem to be ideal for the novelist of ideas, such as Conrad, if it were not for the loss of suspense, especially prospective suspense, which is incurred. If he knows the conclusion in advance, the *reader* will be less able to involve himself in the narrative present, or to care about characters who are themselves locked in the narrative present. Identification is directly proportional to a similarity of perspectives, and prospective suspense, insofar as it is an emotional involvement, depends upon identification.

6 See pp. 11–12. The maintenance of only one narrative present is one of the most basic techniques of nineteenth-century verisimilitude. In life, we are tied to one single present, with a definite past and a definite future. Involvement and identification in fiction is achieved by copying this phenomenon.

(iv) Marlow and Reliability Suspense

Once more, it is difficult to isolate and examine structures of theme suspense comparable to those on the level of plot. In texts of an earlier period, *Paradise Lost* for example, the theme to be examined is established in the first lines and the reader can see a coherent development towards a specific affirmation. But the thematic anagnorisis (in the form of a *moral*) has become steadily less fashionable in our literature and, in the novel at least, conclusions to thematic structures tend to be implicit rather than explicit.

Conrad is no exception to this rule. His texts persuade us that we may learn something if we continue reading, that the *author* has gained an understanding of life which is superior to our own. One of the most important functions of Marlow is that he can make direct promises of significances to come. He professes no interest in the basic plots of the stories he tells (despite the meticulously constructed patterns of retrospective suspense), but makes numerous promises of significances to come on a thematic level. For instance, when Marlow first gets to talk to Jim, he observes:

“The occasion was obscure, insignificant — what you will: a lost youngster, one in a million — but then he was one of us; an incident as completely devoid of importance as the flooding of an ant-heap, and yet the mystery of his attitude got hold of me as though he had been an individual in the forefront of his kind, as if the obscure truth involved were momentous enough to affect mankind’s conception of itself ...” (viii, 69).

Such comments would not fit the established standards of decorum for authors at the turn of the century and there are no such enticements in the non-Marlovian texts. Marlow, like Conrad, has, in fact, no affirmation he can make which he does not feel should be shrouded in misgivings, so it is difficult to say when the obscure truth emerges. Marlow establishes himself, like the typical [late] Victorian novelist, in the role of theme-detective, but, unlike his contemporary Sherlock Holmes, he cannot reveal the answer, or the kernel of the nut, in order to resolve our suspense. Yet he occasionally tells us, especially when the narrative is in danger of flagging, that we are close to a solution, for instance when he talks to Stein:

“we had approached nearer to absolute Truth, which, like Beauty itself, floats elusive, obscure, half-submerged, in the silent still waters of mystery” (xx, 158)

This is yet more vague and grand than any of the promises which Conrad himself makes in the Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*.¹

1 See Conrad’s *Manifesto: Preface to a Career* (Philadelphia: Gehenna, 1966); David Goldknopf, *The Life of the Novel*, pp. 81–83.

Marlow repeatedly pictures himself as being on the threshold of insight and understanding, and we continue reading in the hope that the threshold will be crossed.

In this respect, Marlow's narratives may be considered as philosophical shaggy dog stories. In the traditional shaggy dog story, a parody of that most teleological of genres, the joke, the narrative always seems to be poised to reach its punch line. As much suspense as possible is generated and that suspense is not discharged in the conventional way at the end. Consequently, there is often a suspicion that the teller receives more pleasure than his frustrated audience,² even though the final non-peripeteia produces an anagnorisis in a very different context, that of narrative conventions themselves. But Conrad's texts do not underline their own incompleteness in the way that *Tristram Shandy*, for example, does.³ They offer a clear-cut conclusion to plot-suspense structures to compensate for their failure to fulfil pledges on a deeper level.

Are we supposed to recognise that Marlow's narratives fail in their self-imposed tasks? Many of Conrad's commentators have been concerned with the reliability of Marlow, or, rather, the degree to which he is a spokesman for Conrad's own attitude to the story.⁴ There can be no final answer to this question, but it is nevertheless possible to trace a suspense structure relating to Marlow's reliability or authorisation. As we read through his accounts, it is inevitable that we will try to compare his views with those of the *author*. At different points in our reading, we gain a very different impression of the relation between the two, and one can only assume that this is part of a deliberate rhetorical strategy on Conrad's part, the calculated maintenance of what might be called reliability suspense.

We judge Marlow in two ways. Our first major opportunity lies in a comparison between what we take to be the individuals and events themselves (insofar as we can distinguish them from Marlow's hazy account of them), and what Marlow makes of them, the conclusions and patterns he draws from the evidence. In *Lord Jim*, we can see Jim landing on his feet, making the most of his luck, and eventually enjoying a life of what Marlow reluctantly describes as "Arcadian happiness" (xvi, 129). Yet Marlow, without knowing of the final events at Patusan, insists on regarding most of Jim's attempts at recovery as absurd. He says of Jim's attempted rehabilitation and that of others like him: "they were all equally tinged by a high-minded absurdity of intention which made their futility profound and touching" (xix, 144).

2 *Lord Jim* and *Heart of Darkness* both contain indications that Marlow's audience is less than enthralled by his stories, and the only feedback he receives is critical. See, esp., *Lord Jim*, xxxvi, 248, 249.

3 See p. 339, n. 57.

4 See, e.g., David Goldknopf, *The Life of the Novel*, Chapter Five.

In Marlow's view, Jim can never make a complete recovery from the error he has made in jumping from the *Patna*: "The truth seems to be that it is impossible to lay the ghost of a fact" (xix, 144), a sentiment he echoes on several occasions.

We assume that Marlow knows the end of the story and that his pessimism is justified. But, as Jim's fortunes improve, it is likely that we will suspect that Marlow's judgement of the situation and his fatalistic philosophy are suspect.⁵ When he gives us a glimpse of the end as he knows it, as early as the beginning of Chapter Sixteen, our expectations become decidedly disoriented:

"The time was coming when I should see him loved, trusted, admired, with a legend of strength and prowess forming round his name *as though* he had been the stuff of a hero. It's true — I assure you." (p. 129) (my italics)

In other words, *we* will know that he is not a hero at all, however successful he appears, and we are not to be allowed to share the fruits of his happy ending.

This proleptic glimpse colours our response to the rest of Marlow's gloomy first narrative, and persuades us to identify certain limitations in Marlow's presentation. Yet, although he does not know it, he is proved right after all. Gentleman Brown appears from nowhere, another "mistake" by Jim causes the death of young warrior, Dain Waris,⁶ and Jim allows himself to be shot by Dain Waris's angry father, Doramin.

Marlow stresses that it is Brown's reminder of his former existence which should be seen as an important factor in Jim's demise: Jim's past has caught up with him at last. It would seem that the function of the separation of the last part of the narrative from the rest is to force the *reader* to conclude that Marlow was indeed capable of seeing through the surface of Jim's prosperity to a deeper reality.

Thus it might be said that the *reader* is enticed into suspecting that the Marlow of *Lord Jim* is an imperfect guide to his story so that he needs to revise his estimate of him in the last section. The process may be seen in reverse in *Heart of Darkness*. In reading this shorter narrative, the reader anticipates the possibility of comparing Marlow's description of Kurtz (who does not appear in the narrative present until the last

5 See, e.g., Marlow's consideration of Cornelius's ill-treated wife (*Lord Jim*, xxviii, 202).

6 Should Jim have massacred Brown and his men while he had the chance? Conrad, of all people, can hardly be expecting us to judge an action by its consequences, as Doramin does. See Conrad's Preface (1920) to *The Secret Agent*, in which he tries to justify his own motives in presenting such a sordid story. Such a justification may bore some, he suggests, "for the world generally is not interested in the motives of any overt act but in its consequences" (p. xxii).

section) with our own impressions of Kurtz. In this respect, Marlow keeps us waiting a very long time,⁷ and our reliability suspense is hardly distinguishable from our character suspense and theme suspense, as we long to meet the man of whom we have heard so much. Marlow persuades us to expect a courageous genius, scholar, idealist, altruistic philosopher, and orator. If not quite the Messiah,⁸ he will at least be a prophet, the goal of Marlow's long journey towards enlightenment.⁹

Eventually, we are forced to perceive that Kurtz is none of these things. Far from an idealist, he is prepared to kill his rivals, or neighbouring tribes, in order to obtain their ivory.¹⁰ He is intensely self-centred, a hypocrite, sexual pervert and/or murderer (as Marlow coyly reveals),¹¹ insane, incapable of any rational discourse, and petrified by fear. It would be difficult to imagine a more complete contrast between expectations and actuality. Like Kurtz's own name, and the story that Marlow tells the Intended,¹² everything that Marlow says in the first two sections of *Heart of Darkness* maybe described as untrue.

But the frame to Marlow's narration gives us no indication that he is to be regarded as unreliable, that there is a significant gap between Marlow's view of Kurtz and that of the implied author.¹³ It is Marlow rather than Kurtz who demonstrates powers of magnificent eloquence, even to the point of seeming to put into words a secret drawn from the heart of darkness. That eloquence exploits frequent oxymorons and paradoxes, as well as strings of conflicting adjectives, which further reliability suspense by offering equivocal suggestions that Marlow has lost control of his ideas in his imaginative fervour. Occasionally, he seems to step beyond the legitimate powers of first-person narration,

7 The first two sections or instalments of *Heart of Darkness* concentrate single-mindedly on generating an expectation that we will learn something profound when we do meet Kurtz, especially in the concluding lines of each. In general, however, it is true that Conrad took less notice of the fact of serialisation than his Victorian predecessors. The serialised *Lord Jim* went far beyond its planned length, and Conrad generally revised and re-wrote his narratives for publication in book form. For full details of Conrad's serialisation, see Frederick R. Karl, *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), pp. 385, 494–99, 555–57, 711–15.

8 Marlow's language throughout is full of images drawn from religion and mysticism; Kurtz is the initiate and Marlow the pilgrim who seeks a place amongst the elect. See, esp., the description of Kurtz's death, p. 149.

9 Allon White treats Marlow as if he was a "symptomatic" reader, but that hardly applies to his description of his younger self, if we take White's definition — symptomatic reading's initial gesture one of suspicion or refusal" *The Uses of Obscurity* p. 6.

10 The Russian says to Marlow, "I don't mind telling you he wanted to shoot me too... He declared he would shoot me unless I gave him the ivory and then cleared out of the country ... " (p. 128).

11 *Heart of Darkness*, p.131.

12 See Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 241–244, for an analysis of the lies that Marlow tells in *Heart of Darkness*.

13 The last sentence of *Heart of Darkness*, in the author's own voice, is remarkably similar in style, tone, and language to Marlow's own narration.

but such transgressions seem trivial compared with the liberties of omniscience taken by the teacher of languages in *Under Western Eyes*.¹⁴

Our second opportunity to judge Marlow arises from his own part in the narratives that he relates, and again the evidence is conflicting. Marlow tries to be a true friend to Jim, and attempts to give time, understanding, and help, but to what extent does he succeed? Was it necessary that Jim's life should have ended in the way that it did? Through his attitudes and simply through his physical presence, Marlow is a perpetual reminder to Jim of the mistake that he made and the impossibility of turning his back on the past. Just as Jewel accuses Marlow of coming to Patusan to take Jim away from her, the reader may suspect that this is precisely the effect that Marlow does have on Jim. Marlow places the blame on Gentleman Brown for reminding Jim of his former life and does not hold himself in any way responsible, but the reader may experience a few doubts.¹⁵

It is no coincidence, therefore, that we find a comparable situation in *Heart of Darkness*, written almost simultaneously with the longer text. Again, Marlow is the representative of one world infiltrating another as he attempts to relieve Kurtz at the Inner Station and bring him back to civilisation. Kurtz, although he needs medical help, has no wish to be reminded of the world that he has left, still less to be taken back to that world. Yet this is exactly what Marlow tries to do, even after Kurtz makes a pathetic attempt to escape into the jungle, only to be recaptured by the fatherly Englishman.

Marlow, of course, has no doubts that he has Kurtz's best interests at heart, but the reader may choose to judge by results. Whether Kurtz would have died anyway is difficult to determine because the text offers no medical specification, but it is clear that Marlow's attempt to help him fails as completely as his efforts to save Jim. Once more, Marlow weeps no tears at the death of the man he has gone so far to meet, nor does he feel any burden of responsibility.

But one should beware of overstating the case against Marlow. He reveals a number of positive qualities which compensate for his occasional obtuseness in his handling of others. The mixture of qualities and weaknesses has the effect of frustrating our desire to label Marlow as reliable or unreliable, and thus maintains a suspense structure which is not finally resolved. This indeterminate "placing" of Marlow undercuts our response to his narratives on a wider thematic

14 Marlow certainly presumes to know a great deal about Kurtz's thoughts and the state of his soul. See, esp., pp. 131, 147.

15 See *Lord Jim*, xli, 280–82, for the comments which Brown makes on Jim which seem calculated to take Jim back to the life that he has left. But it is difficult for the reader to see a comparable sense of guilt or a similarity of personality.

level and may be considered as an effective example of de-authorisation.¹⁶

Conrad was a master of all the contemporary modes of de-authorisation and others of his own invention, as Werner Senn has ably demonstrated.¹⁷ His texts have arrested critical attention in proportion to their difficulty, a difficulty not of ideas but of presentation. When Conrad resorts to straightforward nineteenth-century narrative methods, as in his later works, he is not often difficult to understand. Even in the period of his greatest works, he was prepared, occasionally, to use the old methods of linear chronology, a clear distinction between “open” and “closed” characters, and a strong sense of narrative present. *The End of the Tether* (1902), despite the pessimism of its themes and the weariness of its feeling, is one such straightforward text. It has received very little critical attention because its themes (e.g. of sight and blindness) and ironies are easily perceived and understood on a second, or even a first, reading. Its comparative accessibility makes it, for many, far more enjoyable to read than, for example, *Nostromo* or *Heart of Darkness*.

The weaknesses of each character on the *Sofala* are specifically identified by the omniscient *author*, and there is even a mystery structure which culminates in the revelation that Whalley is going blind and is therefore no longer capable of captaining his ship. There are two evident threats to the security of the sympathetic protagonist in the persons of Sterne and Massy, and there is considerable prospective suspense as to which “sleeper” will be activated.¹⁸ In the end it is Massy, rather than Sterne (who had seemed to pose the greater threat), who brings about Whalley’s downfall. As this old-fashioned, even melodramatic, tragedy is concluded, Conrad resists the temptation to show that Whalley’s daughter was not worth the sacrifices that he has made for her.

From his superior stand-point, the *reader* can easily appreciate most of the ironies of Whalley’s situation, but this is by no means the norm in Conrad’s works at this time. Conrad saw his own method as being basically ironic, for instance, in his Preface to *The Secret Agent*:

Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity (p. xiii).

16 See pp. 13, 266 ff.

17 Werner Senn, *Conrad’s Narrative Voice: Stylistic Aspects of his Fiction* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1980), esp., pp.129–59.

18 See p. 362, n. 35.

But insofar as irony is a comparison of perspectives and a medium of communication, most of Conrad's strategies may be said to be anti-ironic. Sometimes, as we have seen, obscurity is produced in order to maintain a retrospective suspense structure on a plot level, and at other times it acts as a barrier between the author and his text. The "chronological looping" in *Nostromo*, for example, obscures the degree to which the plot has been badly chosen to reflect what we take to be the themes of that text, and the degree to which it relies for its appeal on old-fashioned narrative qualities of mystery, adventure, and identification.

Through his adaptation of Victorian techniques of suspense, Conrad may, like Hardy, be said to have found a means of bridging the gap between the old novel and the new. By the simple expedient of failing to resolve many of his suspense structures within the text, Conrad ensure that those texts retain their enigmatic qualities for subsequent generations.

In the hermeneutic mystery, as we have seen, the answer must be contained in the question, in the verbal evidence of the development of the mystery. Once the answer is not concealed in the question itself, once there is no specified end to the journey, it becomes very difficult to judge the effectiveness of the means of travel. Conrad's novels therefore provide a convenient stopping place for a study of narrative suspense.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

Until now, suspense has attracted very little attention as a critical concept or as an aspect of the experience of reading a novel. The two main reasons for this neglect are the prevalence of a criticism which relies on several completed readings, and the disrepute of suspense, plot, and sensationalism in general. Beyond a vague recognition that we carry on reading because we like to know what happens next, few have thought the notion of suspense in need of further elucidation. Nobody has attempted a rhetoric of suspense or a sub-division of suspense into smaller working categories.¹ In the preceding chapters, I hoped to commence the process of rectifying that omission, and to create a body of concepts through which individual examples of suspense may be analysed.

It will be perceived that all the novelists under consideration here wrote a certain type of novel, the “classic realist” narrative, as Belsey calls it.² There has been little discussion of other types of novel, the novels which we associate with impressionism, absurdism, or symbolism, for example. Such novels hold the attention of their readers by a variety of means and may be said to generate structures of suspense, but these structures are less amenable to the critical practices suggested here. Those considered here attempt a controlled retention of information or ideas until a specific moment when that information is imparted. Only when reticence is deliberate and the information specific can we enumerate rhetorical strategies and judge them according to their success in achieving these ends.

It is only in the last two hundred years that man has become aware that he enjoys both halves of the cycle of uncertainty (tension) and resolution (relaxation), and that he may even prefer the former state. The growth of the custom of serialisation, because it artificially elongated the period of suspense, and the eighteen-century theory of the sublime may be seen as the two most important factors leading to a reversal of our understanding of suspense. But the changing attitude to suspense is not reflected in the usage of the word *suspense* itself until late in the nineteenth century. The term is derived from a Latin verb which almost invariably carried pejorative connotations.

1 Here it will be evident that I am discounting Eric Rabkin's *Narrative Suspense* in this respect. See pp. 67–74.

2 See p. 329, n. 13.

The link which the ancient world intuitively perceived between the physical state of hanging and the mental states of ignorance and uncertainty is mirrored in the mythology through which that culture understood itself. Classical mythology, notably in its idea of the underworld, reveals a fear of suspenseful feelings and such related emotions of incompleteness as desire (for food, sex, or knowledge) and insecurity. Christian mythology demonstrates a comparable bias and, similarly, idealises a state when all such emotions will have been superseded by a sense of pastoral security and completeness. Suspense's associations with darkness, ignorance, and the inability to judge accurately, have ensured its disapproval in most periods of literature, notably the Augustan period.

There is evidence to suggest that audiences of time past have preferred the secure, ritualised repetition of old stories to the uncertainty of the new, and I have offered a few possible explanations as to why this should be so on the pre-supposition that literature supplements man's other experiences. Plot suspense is inseparably linked to the novel because what is novel about the novel is the plot. Almost all preceding narrative and drama borrowed a plot from a limited lexicon of stories, known in advance by a significant proportion of the audience.

Aristotle was ahead of his time in his ability to see that wondering as well as learning could be pleasurable, but his recommendation of a narrative trajectory which is fifty per cent suspense and fifty per cent resolution does not reflect modern practice. The history of literature reveals a gradual extension of the period of suspense, and a shortening of the resolution, even to the point where it disappears altogether. The resolution had not yet disappeared in the nineteenth-century novel, but we can see an increasing preference for the type of narrative which hoards all its secrets until the last moment rather than release them gradually. The reader's anagnorisis, the moment of the sudden and complete revelation of the embodied meaning of the text, is compressed into the shortest possible instant of time.

Ideally, such an anagnorisis reorganises every element of our understanding of the preceding text, replacing one apparent causal sequence, one set of links between events, with another which is completely different. In the Austenian romance, this takes the form of a reversal of our understanding of the character and conduct of the primary male characters. In the detective story, it involves the transfer of guilt from one suspect who seemed inescapably guilty to another who has a perfect alibi. Cast-iron causal sequences, even those which culminate in a character's death, may turn out to be the illusions created by one particular incomplete perspective. Yet the classic novel retains its assumption that a complete perspective is possible, that a satisfying resolution may be reached.

The Austenian romance is seen as the forerunner of the detective novel, the most teleological and mechanical of all nineteenth-century genres. In both types of narrative, an analysis of the attributes necessary to the final anagnorisis reveals the degree to which the rest of the text is determined by the conclusion. For Jane Austen, and the nineteenth century in general, it was necessary to break away from the Augustan tradition of prose-writing, with its clear-cut standards of correctness, decorum, and restraint, whereby deviations from stylistic norms are easily identifiable, with the result that irony and an implied authorial attitude could be easily located.

Irony is pleasurable, indeed a type of minor anagnorisis, when the reader feels sure that he has located it correctly. Yet irony itself may create suspense if the prevailing voice cannot be easily located. The potential irony offers a nexal indication of a possible authorial perspective, but we must wait for confirmation or denial. But identifiable irony, like the conclusion itself, is the reverse or corollary of suspense, closing rather than opening a gap between text and *reader*. There are numerous stable ironies in all the texts under consideration here, if only on a second or third reading. But we have seen that many of the ironic meanings of nineteenth-century texts are obscured by structures of suspense which destroy the *reader's* grasp of the narrative situation.

In considering the Austenian romance, different categories of character suspense are analysed in some detail, although it is often difficult to distinguish plot-suspense from character-suspense or even prospective suspense of character from retrospective suspense.³ In her Austenian romances, George Eliot favoured the simple, but risky, device of not marrying the two most attractive characters at the end of the narrative. In *Daniel Deronda*, this tactic is combined with a non-linear presentation in order to maintain suspense and achieve surprise. But the maintenance of an Austenian romance structure does not combine well with the intentions of psychological realism which are sometimes attributed to this author.

In general, psychological investigation limits the possibility of surprise or shock by allowing the *reader* to anticipate a dramatic event before it occurs, thus separating his anagnorisis from the description of the event, the peripeteia itself. A higher level of verisimilitude compensates for the loss of the pleasures of surprise and George Eliot, unlike other Victorians, was often prepared to make this sacrifice. In the classic text, the free play of suspense and reversal is necessarily constrained,

3 Our ability to distinguish between prospective and retrospective suspense of character is more dependent on the situation of the narrator, esp. if the narrative concerns himself, than it is on the level of plot. *Great Expectations*, e.g., would be a typical problem case.

to some degree, by the laws of verisimilitude. If the requirement to achieve verisimilitude is abandoned, suspense structures tend to become meaningless and unsatisfactory.⁴ A common body of assumptions about the world which is being imitated is therefore a prerequisite of organised suspense.

The Victorians tended to use the Austenian romance to tie together a number of other less teleological genres. They favoured a certain measure of generic experimentation, combining old genres with new, sometimes with a careless regard for the differing perspectives of the *reader* as he responds to each type of narrative. Hermeneutic mysteries are constructed in a high proportion of Victorian, especially mid-Victorian, novels. Traditionally, such mysteries concerned the birth of the protagonist but, employing techniques developed in handling the Austenian romance, the mystery was soon extended to a number of other situations, notably murder.

Adam Bede, *Barnaby Rudge*, and *Lord Jim*, early works of their respective authors, attempt to make mysteries of events which are not mysteries to central characters within the narrative.⁵ None of these attempts can be said to be truly successful because suspense is achieved at too high a cost. There are two distinct variants of the Victorian mystery, best exemplified by the texts of Collins and Bierce,⁶ and it is the latter form which is closest to that most Victorian of twentieth-century genres, the detective novel. The Biercian type, as in Chapter Six, may be described as the adventure-turned-to-mystery, a type of genre suspense, providing the *reader* with all the generic indications of adventure, before unexpectedly reorganising the causal sequence and creating a mystery in retrospect, an anagnorisis without preceding retrospective suspense.

In theory at least, the adventure and mystery are at opposite extremes of the Victorian narrative spectrum. Adventure optimistically reassures man of his ability to transform his fate by his own moment-to-moment choices, and therefore to escape the various forces of predetermination, the grip of the machine.

Mystery, on the other hand, shatters that illusion of freedom by revealing the determining factors which had remained concealed. Sometimes, however, the hidden pattern is a liberating force, replacing

4 This is true of many twentieth-century metageneric anagnorises, which surprise us on the level of conventions in general, but which make the preceding narrative redundant.

5 Here, in the case of *Barnaby Rudge*, I refer specifically to the mystery of the identity of the figure who makes Mrs Rudge's life uncomfortable, rather than the connected mystery of Haredale's death.

6 In the case of Collins, we know there is a mystery, but with Bierce we tend not to, and our experience is closer to that of genre suspense; Collins's texts have a more clearly-defined narrative direction.

a sequence which seems sure to culminate in disaster with another which allows the protagonist to live happily ever after.

The transformational narrative is tied to the machine plot insofar as the transformed plot, as revealed by the anagnorisis, requires the justification of a tightly-woven and plausible causal sequence. Paradoxically, since it undermines another equally reasonable causal sequence, it also provides a liberation from the dictates of the machine, the burden of the past, even to the point of bringing the dead back to life. In the Austenian romance, for example, the heroine (and thus the *reader*) makes the joyful discovery that the past has lost its apparent meaning, and a fresh choice can be made to live happily. Anne Elliot perceives that she and Wentworth love each other after all, and that her apparent destiny, as a spinster who has missed her chance of marrying, is an illusion.

Dickens also favours the transformation from an unsatisfactory destiny to a “fairy-tale” release from the negative implications of character and situation. Eugene Wrayburn escapes not only from the seemingly inevitable consequences of Headstone’s murder attempt (i.e. his own death), but also rids himself of the debilitating features of his own character (his lethargy and superciliousness), so that he can marry Lizzie. But, in the period after Dickens’s death, the transformation tends to institute a causal sequence which is less agreeable than the one it replaces. Bierce’s characters suspect that they are bound by one causal mesh only to discover that they are caught in another strait-jacket, with much direr consequences. Just as Oedipus discovers that his past has a meaning of which he had never dreamt, Winnie Verloc finds that she is trapped in a situation which seems to require that she murders her husband, and Jim finds that he cannot escape a past which he had almost managed to obliterate.

Tragedy teaches us that we cannot escape the consequences of our characters and situation, but the machine plot in general was beginning to lose its verisimilitude at the end of the nineteenth century. Brierly’s death in *Lord Jim*, for example, cannot be explained by reference to a set of causal factors. Conrad was certainly sceptical about the assumptions of meaningful causality which underlie most of the traditional genres, but the continuing demands of a wide audience and financial necessity persuaded him to concoct a form which has many of the superficial attributes of the old, and still popular genres, but which questions the truth of those genres and suggests a new absurdist, anti-meaningful perspective.

When Dickens died, the mystery genre had reached its zenith of respectability and popularity, its techniques mastered by a number of authors, including the young Hardy. But Hardy, like George Eliot, was very reluctant to deny himself the possibility of examining all his

characters' thoughts. Thus Hardy eventually favoured tragedy, a very different form in terms of the *reader's* expectations and knowledge, and the structure of suspense which it creates. The basic pleasure offered to the *reader* of tragedy is that of a productive conflict between his hopes and his expectations.

The anagnorisis should precede a peripeteia by a considerable distance, creating an element of prospective destiny. Prospective destiny is created by straightforward proleptic glimpses, by the tone of authorial commentary, and by an accumulation of plot-springs or sleepers, which the reader knows will eventually be activated.

Once the element of prospective destiny has been established in a tragedy, prospective suspense is replaced by causal suspense, as we attempt to identify, or estimate the relative importance of, the causes of either the peripeteia or the final catastrophe. The greater the number of possible causes, the more complex the tragedy seems. The multiplication of causes helps to inflict as much blame as possible on sympathetic characters, and to divert attention from the weak links in the causal sequence and from the final triggers of death.

Hardy and Conrad both favoured the tactics of employing a language which is packed with apparent significance, and yet of couching it in a framework which effectively undermines that significance and deauthorises it; the last sentence of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a typical example. In Hardy, the scaffolding of quasi-philosophical commentary matches genre, or, more specifically, the position in the tragic parabola.

Conrad's similar commentary is included specifically to create and enhance theme-suspense, which itself increases the reader's sense of the importance of the protagonist's fate. Conrad, like James, exploits a new type of suspense structure, which I have termed reliability suspense, the construction of a narrative in which the reliability of the narrator cannot be easily determined. Such narrative asks us to consider not only the prose style, against some hypothetical norm, but also the narrator's attitude to events against some implied standard.

In the hands of all the writers under consideration, narrative discourse offers almost unlimited resources of ambiguity which can be turned to deceptive purpose, for instance, in the adverbial clauses which follow characters' speeches. In third-person narration, if not the less flexible I-narration,⁷ there is no compulsion to establish clear distinctions

7 It is possible, however, for I-narration to adopt an impressionistic or dream-like style, in which there is no clear distinction between perceived and perceiver, thus offering greater possibilities for context inadequacy.

between different perspectives on fictional events, and rhetorical possibilities are almost unlimited.

Strategies of suspense and deception, within a particular genre such as mystery, must become gradually more subtle in order to stay one step ahead of the *reader*. The experienced reader senses that the more unequivocally a proposition is “proved”, the less likely it is that it will finally turn out to be true. It becomes more effective to create an illusion that the reader has made his own inference, and seen beneath the surface. However, the more subtle the method of convincing the *reader* of something, the less likely it is that the text can control the expectations of the less experienced reader. Once that control has been lost, once a gap is created between the *reader* and actual readers, the fragile structures of suspense break down.

Various types of background noise undermine that control. Serialisation may have made the nineteenth century aware of the pleasures of suspense, but it was an awkward medium for the hermeneutic mystery because it allowed unlimited time for corporate reflection. Poe cannot have been the only reader who solved the mystery of *Barnaby Rudge* (or any of Dickens’s other mysteries) in advance, and then proceeded to tell everyone else, even before the rest of the book had been written.⁸ *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* has allowed an unlimited period for reflection, with the result that the conclusion is now regarded as obvious.

Character lists, one manifestation of the disrepute of plot at the turn of the century, are another type of background noise, reducing a character to a set of static properties and revealing the plot in advance. Plot, character, and theme should not be considered as discrete, finite elements, but as inter-dependent loci of our developing, dynamic responses to the text, and can each thus be considered as suspense structures. I have tried to indicate the degree to which suspense structures on one level may interfere with our enjoyment of another. In particular, plot-suspense may interrupt our developing understanding of themes.

Suspense in the nineteenth century is inevitably conditioned by genre. All the authors considered here chose to work within the conventions of Austenian romance, tragedy, or mystery, and there is an essential homogeneity about their handling of these genres which enables us to talk about a nineteenth century tradition of suspense and a set of common techniques. It has been the primary intention of this study to identify some of those tools of suspense and to estimate the skilfulness of the great novelists of the period in their application of these techniques, in the hope that this will shed a little light, not only on

8 See p. 350, n. 22.

particular authors and genres, but also on the nature of our experience of narrative.

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- (ii) All other novels, early critical texts, collections and any other pre-1915 material;
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