

ASPECTS OF ACTION IN NARRATIVE

Clark Morgan

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Aspects of Action in Narrative

by
Clark Morgan

Submitted for the degree of M. Phil. (Mode A)

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to describe the way in which "unified action" functions within stories. Taking Aristotle's *Poetics* as a point of departure, the first chapter defines unified action as a disturbance, problem, and resolution. It draws extensively on the *Knight's Tale* and *Heart of Darkness*, among others, to illustrate these concepts. The above two stories are further compared with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and two novels by Dostoevsky. The comparison shows how a story's themes lie in the circumstances of the disturbance and are worked out through action.

This discussion leads to an examination of the causes of action. The aim of unified action is to release powerful emotions in the audience such as pity and terror. Aristotle found that such release results when the audience can see *how* previous events in the plot cause subsequent events. He argued that the most effective plot-structures, then, would avoid using non-human causes, such as chance. The plot of the *Reeve's Tale* is a near-perfect realization of such a structure.

Nevertheless, a close examination of stories such as the folktale "The Happy Man's Shirt", and O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", reveals that plot-structures with non-human causes can also release powerful emotions. The discussion indicates that release depends more on "fallibility", or the

protagonist's complicity, in his or her own fate than on a lucid cause-and-effect sequence.

The final chapter is an extended examination of action's place in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Heart of Darkness*. It uses the concepts set out in the first two chapters to define the action, identify themes, and account for the unity of each story. Even in such complex works, action forms a narrative core which provides keys for grasping the total structure of the novels.

I, Clark Morgan, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 55,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

June 1, 1992.

I was admitted as a research student under Ordinance No. 12 in 1989 and as a candidate for the degree of M.Phil. (Mode A) in Feb 1990; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1990 and 1992.

June 1, 1992.

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Introduction

Action has formed the basis upon which stories in the West have traditionally been constructed. Therefore, an understanding of it is a useful way towards comprehending a wealth of stories from both the past and the present. An understanding of action means first of all grasping the plot, that is, perceiving the overall structure of the action as well as the means by which the events in it are connected. This, in turn, yields a grasp of the story's themes, since theme is determined significantly by the action. Finally, action provides a basis for comprehending the story's construction and total unity. The project of this thesis is to present a method of achieving the kind of understanding outlined above. By way of introduction I would like first to set out and defend some of the basic assumptions, methods, and sources of my thesis and then to outline the discussion itself.

Structure and Meaning

The subject of this study is the structure of stories, not their meanings. I have limited myself to structure and avoided discussing meaning because plot-structure, the *arrangement* of events, is susceptible to rational, analytic study, whereas it is highly questionable that the meaning of a story is

understandable at all in a discursive, rational, or intellectual way.

As story-tellers themselves are constantly reminding us, stories do not appeal exclusively or even primarily to the intellect but rather to the emotions. As Tarkovsky observed:

Understanding in a scientific sense means agreement on a cerebral, logical level; it is an intellectual act akin to the process of proving a theorem.

Understanding an artistic image means an aesthetic acceptance of the beautiful, on an emotional or even supra-emotional level. (40; emphasis added)¹

Austrian novelist Robert Musil has similarly written, "To imaginative writing belongs, fundamentally, that which one does not know--reverence for it" (151; my translation). If it is true that acceptance of and reverence for a story are necessary in order to perceive its meaning in the full sense, it is equally true that such attitudes are normally considered anathema in the work of literary criticism. And while writing a thesis is by no means the same thing as writing a story, nevertheless, it would seem to me misguided to work at purposes counter to those of the stories I am ostensibly trying to understand.

¹ The form of citation in this thesis follows the *MLA Style Manual*. The name of the citation's author, the title or section of the work, and page or line number references appear in parentheses immediately following the citation when these are not apparent from the thesis text. References to non-print sources are self-explanatory. The full publication details of each source appear in the "Works Cited" portion of this thesis.

Furthermore, to "understand" a story in an absolute sense, to grasp its meaning, would entail, besides reverence for and acceptance of it, knowing all the story's parts and how they function within the story to form a whole. For example, the *Knight's Tale*, like any other piece of imaginative writing, is a mixture of characters, settings, metaphors, rhythms, images, sounds, and arguments, to name a few of its elements. Its meaning comes from the *combined* force of all these acting together on the reader. Therefore, the only way to come to the full meaning of the *Knight's Tale* is to put all the elements together--in other words to re-read (or rewrite verbatim) the *Knight's Tale*, rather like the character Pierre Menard does with *Don Quixote* in Borges's famous story (62-77). Since meaning comes from the combined force of elements in a work, any attempt to restate or even to identify its "meaning" abstracted from these connections is bound to fall short of the target.

"Style and structure are the essence of a book", said Nabokov, "great ideas are hogwash" (xxxiii). Despite its rather extreme ring, this statement expresses the contention of this thesis that structure, as a subject itself, does lend itself to analytic study where great ideas and meanings do not. A particular arrangement of events can be brought to light, its characteristics named, its effects described, and the principle according to which the author organised the events either discovered or inferred. As Lubbock

observed, a writer is a craftsman, and therefore the legitimate job of the critic is "to overtake him at his work and see how the book was made . . ." (274). This is the aim of my discussion.

Nevertheless, my approach is not "structuralist". Structuralist poetics, according to Jonathan Culler, seeks to "discover the structures and conventions of literary discourse which enable them to have the meanings they do" (8; emphasis added). And Todorov declares: "The literary work does not have a form and a content, but a structure of *significations*" (41; emphasis added). The interest of structuralism in plot, then, is still ultimately an interest in how stories mean. My interest, on the other hand, is in the structure of action itself, not in story structure as a way toward understanding "significations". "Plot-structure . . . is not a vehicle or framework for something else, but constitutes the primary significance of poetic drama" (Halliwell, Commentary 94). This view of plot-structure is a contention in both Aristotle's *Poetics* and in this thesis. The structuring of action is a subject not only suitable for analytic study but one which demands the closest attention as the heart of story-telling.

Relevance and Limitations of Aristotle's Poetics

Aristotle's conceptions of unity of action as found in the *Poetics* form the theoretical basis of this study. There are several reasons for this. Firstly,

Aristotle's thinking came closest to my own initial ideas about story structure. In particular, his emphasis on action as the most important ingredient in the structure of tragedy confirmed my own experience as a reader and a spectator: "The plot-structure is the first principle and, so to speak, the soul of tragedy. . ." (38; ch. 6).² Since the *Poetics* focuses on action, it has proved the discussion most relevant to my approach to story structure.

Secondly, the *Poetics* warrants a primary place in a study such as this as virtually the earliest extant attempt in the West to formulate the principles of narrative structure. Although the influence of the *Poetics* has waned in this century, it is still one of the most enduring and historically influential studies of its subject. In addition, since it does not owe its origin to any particular movement in later European literary history, many of its concepts have, as I hope to demonstrate, application to a wide variety of narratives from various periods.

Thirdly, the *Poetics* possesses exceptional clarity of expression. It is written in simple language and appeals to common sense. The virtues, indeed the

² Throughout the thesis I use the words "tragedy" and "story" practically interchangeably with reference to the *Poetics*. The characteristics of structure discussed by Aristotle often apply to narrative as well, a correspondence made explicit by Aristotle himself: "Whoever knows the difference between a good and a bad tragedy knows the same for epic too; for epic's attributes all belong to tragedy as well, though not all of tragedy's are shared by epic" (36; ch. 5). Those cases in which differing principles apply are duly designated.

indispensability, of these two characteristics would appear to be self-evident, especially in a subject as abstract and theoretical as narrative structure. Yet these virtues are, sadly, all but completely absent in contemporary poetics and narratology. In the "hard" sciences an hypothesis which fits the facts and yet can be simply, clearly, and concisely formulated is considered superior to one which also fits the facts but is complicated and long. It is odd that in the study of narrative, a branch of contemporary criticism which so ardently aspires to the intellectual rigour of "hard" science, the very opposite practice appears to be prized. Aristotle's *Poetics*, by being easy to comprehend, is simply more practical and more useful than other models.

It might be objected that the simplicity of the *Poetics* means that it is also insufficiently sophisticated and detailed for a wide-ranging, contemporary study of structure. This objection has some validity. Indeed one of my major aims in this thesis is to discover where and why Aristotelian unity of action will not do and to suggest modifications of it, as I do in chapter II. Nevertheless, as I hope to show, the *Poetics* is sophisticated enough to provide the basic framework and terminology for a discussion of plot-structure, despite its limitations.

Some of these limitations are rather obvious. Aristotle presents a theory based largely on the dramatic tradition of ancient Greece. Halliwell

reminds us of "the great cultural distance between ourselves and the *Poetics*, a distance which contains types of tragic drama never conceived of by Ar[istotle]". He continues:

This simple fact makes one wonder why modern critics have often persisted in even considering Ar[istotle]'s definition of tragedy as a formula capable of holding together the whole history of tragic poetry. (Commentary 88)

Moreover, Aristotle stipulates the evocation of pity and fear as the aims of the tragedy. Types of stories which aim for different effects--absurdist drama, self-reflexive "metafiction", "minimalism", and "experimental" fiction of various kinds, for example--would not necessarily follow the same structural principles. Indeed, the novel itself, taken as a genre, arguably evidences a preoccupation with exploring the totality of individual character more than with evoking pity and terror.³

It is obvious from the outset, then, that a conception of action derived from the *Poetics* can by no means provide a complete account of narrative action in all fiction. Such is not the aim of this thesis. This study does not seek to present a universal theory of action based on Aristotle or on anyone else but rather examines how unity of action functions in stories or sections of stories that possess it.

The extension of Aristotelian principles to types of narrative other than Greek drama is not as far

³ For a similar idea, see Lukács 75-6 and 79.

removed from the intention of the *Poetics* as it may seem at first glance. The scant attention Aristotle devotes to exclusively *theatrical* elements, as well as his relatively lengthy discussion of epic, indicate that the concern of the *Poetics* is essentially analysis of plot-structure (*mythos*) as such, rather than of the tragedy as such. It goes without saying that plot-structure is fundamental not only to the drama but to everything we can call a story. Furthermore, Greek drama, and indeed most drama, can be seen in the first place as a set of conventions for telling a story--on a stage. So it is not at all surprising that many of the principles of structure which Aristotle discusses are common to various genres of story-telling: tragedy, comedy, epic, romance, short story, folktale, novel, film.

Furthermore, the basic techniques of story-telling described by Aristotle were developed, of course, many centuries before he came to write them down. They are recognizable in folktales, legends, and literatures in many different cultures and ages. Indeed, Holman has the confidence to declare that "the fundamental dramatic structure [of stories] seems timeless and impervious to change" (175).⁴ Though this statement may be open to debate, the principles formulated by Aristotle do represent one indisputably effective and widespread form of structuring stories and of evoking

⁴ For a contrasting point of view, see Lapan 3-69 and 303-7.

certain reactions in an audience. Naturally they are not the only form. However, departures from and variations on classical ideas about unified action will become clearer if the *Poetics* is taken as a framework and point of departure, or so Aristotle claimed.

It might finally be objected that finding Aristotle's ideas of plot-structure in medieval and modern works is a somewhat spurious practice. For example, I have no hard evidence that Milan Kundera has ever read the *Poetics*, and it is fairly safe to assume that the *Gawain* poet did not know the *Poetics* in its classical form. But, of course, neither did Homer. Yet his works exhibit "Aristotelian" structure. The *Poetics* is of interest in this study not because of any influence it may have had on the *composition* of the works in question but as a *description* of the way action works in them.

Selection of Stories

I discuss unity of action in various works-- narrative poems, folktales, a short story, a novella, and several novels--from widely separate periods. The reasons for the selection I have made are as follows.

Firstly, I chose stories that had readily identifiable plot-structures, stories which I enjoy reading, and stories with which I was familiar without regard to when they were written. The distance between the literary periods in which they were composed emphasises the importance of action in them as the

essence of narrative. Stories which have little else in common may yet possess comparable plot-structures. The structure of action is thus clearly more *essential* and less dependent on historical context than the three other structural elements relevant to the story identified by Aristotle: character, style, and thought (37; ch. 6). This is not to dismiss the valid differentiation of historical periods, genres, and literary conventions.⁵ My intent is rather to discuss the common element of action in stories and the means of ordering it regardless of these distinctions.

Secondly, the prevailing characterizations of types of stories according to historical period (e.g. the "medieval" romance, the Gothic tale of the Romantic era, the "modern" psychological novel, etc.) are not discrete as is sometimes assumed. Such divisions are frequently more convenient than accurate. They can make little sense of, for example, the appearance of such a consummately "psychological" work as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in the middle ages nor of Mark Twain's picaresque adventure, *Huckleberry Finn*, during the general mood of disillusionment in literary America at the close of the nineteenth century, nor of the appearance of Gothic tales by Flannery O'Connor in the mid-twentieth. And a story such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*--an insightful and subtle psychological study of its protagonist while at the same time a

⁵ For a well-argued defence of their distinctness, see Reed.

romance--must seem very puzzling indeed. And yet as John Stevens points out:

The concerns of medieval romance are the concerns of all narrative fiction. . . . Nor is there anything special about the way the romance writer conducts his narrative and achieves his effects.
(9)

Nabokov put the similarity between modern and traditional story forms even more directly: "Great novels are great fairy stories" (xxvi).⁶ Comparing stories primarily in terms of their plot-structures rather than according to the years in which they were written provides a way out of the problems of historical categorisation and points the way to more meaningful ways of grouping. I chose stories with similar plot-structures ranging from the years 458 BC to AD 1984 in order to underline this point.

Thirdly, I should emphasise that the stories were also selected on the basis of their suitability as illustrations, on account of their clarity or complexity, and, again, without regard to when they were produced. I have made no attempt to show any sort of "representative" cross section of stories from major literary or historical divisions. Thus, in chapter III, for example, the discussion concentrates almost exclusively on two stories from the twentieth century. This circumstance is irrelevant since the subject is not when the plots were structured but how. The time

⁶ In this connection see Jordan's exploration of "post-modernistic" preoccupations in Chaucer's poetics, esp. 5-22 and 169-74.

in which a story was written is but one factor influencing its composition. The language in which it was written is another and the nationality or culture of the author yet another. All of these considerations, however influential they have been in the construction of the stories cited, are simply beyond the scope of this by no means exhaustive study.

Organization

Chapter I consists of two parts. The first defines basic terms such as disturbance, active problem and super-objective. In particular, the first part establishes a working understanding of action as the doings of the characters that either complicate or work toward resolving the active problem. The first part also asserts that a story's themes are inherent in the initial situation and are worked out through action.

The second part of the chapter is an extended demonstration of this assertion, focusing on the *Knight's Tale* and *Heart of Darkness* as illustrations. Situation and theme in the *Knight's Tale* are compared with their counterparts in two novels by Dostoyevsky, while the same elements in *Heart of Darkness* are compared to their corollaries in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The aim of the comparison is to show how differing active problems, initial situations, and the conditions governing these situations determine differences in action and hence in the story's themes.

Whereas chapter I sets out a basic conception of unity of action derived from Aristotle and extends its implications to theme, chapter II is a critique of the principles governing the connection of events in the plot. The Aristotelian conception of unity of action is shown to rest on an assumption that the causes of events in a story are understandable in purely human terms. After briefly analyzing the basic components of plot-structure in the first part of the chapter, I outline the merits of the plot-structure understandable purely in terms of human causality--the "lucid" plot-structure--in the second part. These merits are, primarily, lucidity itself and irony. Irony is shown to result from the "fallibility" of the characters. Lucidity and irony, in turn, are shown to generate the release of powerful emotions--e.g. mirth, pity, and terror. The final part of the chapter examines action resulting from non-human causes in the stories, "The Happy Man's Shirt", the *Knight's Tale*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find". I conclude that, contrary to Aristotle's theory, plots which contain non-human causes are capable of releasing powerful emotions as long as the conditions for fallibility (or responsibility in the case of comedy) are maintained.

Having thus established a model for understanding action and its relation to theme, and with a modified conception of causation in plot-structure in the first two chapters, I turn in chapter III to the place and

function of action within the total structure of two longer, complex, non-classically constructed stories--*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Heart of Darkness*. In both stories action is not the element unifying the entire work. Both stories are shown to be unified by some other element--the concept of the "existential code" in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and "effect" in *Heart of Darkness*. Nevertheless, action is shown to function in both stories as the core of the work.

I conclude with some remarks on the value of action in the study of narrative as well as a brief discussion of some of the pressing questions about action yet to be explored.

Chapter I

Action and Theme

According to Aristotle, tragedy is the representation of "an action which is complete, [and] whole . . ." (39; ch. 7). This immediately invites the question: What is an action? Since every action is presumably the result of some previous action, how do we know where an action begins? To take, for example, a hypothetical story about, say, a king slaying a dragon--should it begin with the king waking on the morning of the battle or just before he enters the lair--*in medias res*--or should it begin when the king first became king, or on the day he was born, or, after the manner of Lawrence Sterne, at the moment of his conception? For that matter, why could it not begin on the day the dragon was born?¹ What is an action? Where does an action begin?

Terms

The answer is perhaps not as complicated as one might expect. In narrative terms, an action begins with a disturbance.² A disturbance is the event which

¹ See John Gardner's *Grendel*, a version of the Beowulf legend told from the monster's point of view.

² This term and definition I have from a playwriting seminar lead by Scottish playwright, Ian Heggie, St. Andrews, 13-15 Sept. 1991.

disrupts a previous state of balance and sets the rest of the story's action in motion.

A simple fairy tale called "Monkey Palace" may serve as a good illustration. A certain king, unsure which of his twin sons, John or Anthony, should inherit his kingdom, sends them out into the world to find a bride. The son whose bride presents him with the rarer and finer gift will become crown prince. The twins ride away in different directions. After two days John becomes engaged to the daughter of a marquis and returns home. Meanwhile Anthony wanders into a kingdom of monkeys. They invite him to stay for awhile. Anthony agrees, and he and some monkeys play a game of bridge. During his first night in this strange land, he is awakened by the voice of a monkey who promises that if he marries her, he will certainly take home the finer gift and win the crown. Anthony agrees and brings her back to his father's kingdom for the wedding. This causes great consternation in the royal city, and everyone wonders how the king will react to his son marrying a monkey. But the king says only, "He chose her, so he has to marry her."

On the wedding day, to everyone's astonishment, Anthony's bride suddenly turns into a beautiful princess. The two brides then present their gifts to their father-in-law, and it turns out Anthony's bride's is indeed much finer. The king is on the point of proclaiming Anthony crown prince when Anthony's bride reveals that she has a kingdom of her own which she is

giving to Anthony. So John is made crown prince, everyone is satisfied, and the story ends (Calvino 222-5).

"Monkey Palace" begins with a problem: "Once there was a king who had twin sons, John and Anthony. As he was not quite sure which of the two was born first . . . the king couldn't say who was crown prince" (Calvino 222). However, this is not exactly the disturbance. A disturbance is an event, and it must change the status quo. Readers may safely assume that the king has been unsure of which son is supposed to be crown prince at least for some years, if not from their birth. His uncertainty, then, is not a change, but the status quo itself. Further, according to the definition above, the disturbance must set the rest of the action in motion. The king's uncertainty by itself does not do this. It is his decision to *do* something about his uncertainty that forms the disturbance:

I want you each to go out into the world and seek a wife. The one whose bride presents me with the rarer and finer gift will be named crown prince.
(Calvino 222)

This is the event which upsets the state of balance by setting John and Anthony in competition against each other. In addition, the rest of the story grows from it as the characters act in response: the princes ride off to search for brides, John finds a marquis's daughter, Anthony agrees to marry a monkey, and so forth.

Similarly, the disturbance in Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* is the priests asking Oedipus to do something about the plague. In *Hamlet* it is the ghost telling the prince to take action. The Green Knight's "game" and his ability to go on living with his head severed form the disturbance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In Goethe's *Faust* the disturbance is Mephisto's deal, and in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* it is Agamemnon who causes the disruption by returning home.

The disturbance destroys a previous state of harmony or *balance* (Heggie).³ However, the initial state of balance can either be implied, as it is in "Monkey Palace", or depicted as it is in the feast scene from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Here is the scene just before the Green Knight bursts into the hall:⁴

Thus ther stondes in stale the stif kyng
 hisselden,
 Talkande bifore the hyghe table of trifles ful
 hende.
 There gode Gawan was graythed Gwenore bisyde,
 And Agravayn a la dure mayn on that other syde
 sittes,
 Bothe the kynges sister sunes and ful siker
 knightes;
 Bischop Bawdewyn abof bigines the table,
 And Ywan, Uryn son, ette with hymselfen.
 These were dight on the des and derworthly
 served,
 And sithen many siker segge at the sidbordes.
 Then the first cors come with crakkyng of trumpes,
 Wyth many baner ful bryght that therbi henged;
 Nwe nakryn noyse with the noble pipes,
 Wylde werbles and wyght wakned lote,
 That mony hert ful highe hef at her towches.
 Dayntés dryven therwyth of ful dere metes,
 Foyssoun of the fresche, and on so fele disches

³ For a similar idea, see Todorov 111.

⁴ For the full effect, read also the immediately preceding lines 37-106.

That pine to fynde the place the peple biforne
 For to sette the sylveren that sere sewes halden
 on clothe.
 Iche lede as he loved hymselfe
 Ther laght withouten lothe;
 Ay two had disches twelve,
 Good ber and bryght wyn bothe. (107-29)

It should be plain, from the examples I have given, that the potential for disturbance is inherent in the situation--in the equilibrium itself--before the disturbance occurs. In "Monkey Palace" a state of harmony is implied which the king disturbs by proposing the contest of presents. However, the king's uncertainty was there before his proposal. Indeed his uncertainty makes the disturbance likely.

Likewise, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, King Arthur actually invites a disturbance by refusing to eat or drink until he hears or experiences some adventure which, he makes quite plain, might well be a matter of life and death: "in jopardé to lay, / Lede lif for lyf . . ." (97-8). In addition, the lofty morals and general knightly excellence of Camelot at large and of Gawain in particular perch the hero in a position which will prove impossible for him to maintain. Indeed, it is in order to debunk Camelot's assumption of moral and chivalric magnificence that Morgan le Faye and Bertilak cook up the ruse of the Green Knight in the first place. Bertilak himself reveals this just after Gawain's humiliation:

For to assay the surquidré, yif hit soth were
 That rennes of the grete renoun of the
 Rounde Table. (2457-8)

In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus seems to have re-established a balance at the beginning by marrying the widowed queen. However, since the queen is his own mother, the balance is founded on error and cannot possibly endure for very long. It is consequently this state of balance itself which brings on the disturbance--the plague.

In *Agamemnon* it is true that the initial situation--an adulterous affair between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus on the eve of her husband's return--is certainly not tranquil; some might balk at calling so shaky an arrangement "balanced". Yet, stability is not what is meant by "balance". A pair of scales, for example, is inherently unstable. The situation is wrong and cannot long continue, nevertheless it is *balanced*, that is, inactive, until Agamemnon returns. His return upsets the balance and forces change; Clytemnestra and Aegisthus must act. The instability was inherent in the situation, but it needed the disturbance--Agamemnon's return--to make it active.

Likewise, in *Hamlet* things are rotten before the curtain ever rises; the crime has already been committed, and Hamlet is grumpy and suspicious from the outset. However, he has no imperative to act until the ghost appears. Thus, a balance, implied or depicted, must exist at the beginning of a story, but it is likely to be precarious.

Once the initial balance is broken, the story's action begins. This action, however, is naturally not

random but related directly to the disruption, specifically, to the problem that the disruption creates. It consists of the result of the disturbance and the force or forces working in the opposite direction. The problem introduced by the disruption and from which all the action of the story arises is called the *active problem*.⁵

A story may contain many problems but, typically, only one which causes all the action. In "Monkey Palace" this is not the king's uncertainty (for the reasons cited above) but the contest between Anthony and John. The monkey's proposal to Anthony introduces another big problem--a human mating with a monkey, and since this problem is perhaps more alarming than the twins' contest, it might seem like the story's main problem.⁶ But in fact, it is but a dilemma (to marry a monkey or not) that Anthony encounters on his way to solving the original problem--how to become crown prince. Therefore, the story does not end when the monkey is spectacularly transformed into a beautiful princess, though this may well be the emotional high point of the story; it ends when the original problem is no longer a problem: "All the monkeys newly changed into human beings hailed Anthony as their king. John inherited his father's kingdom, and everybody lived in

⁵ Adapted from Heggie's concept of the "active question" which he defines as "the protagonist's super-objective in the form of a question".

⁶ For a Chinese folktale on the problem of monkeys mating with humans, see Eberhard's translation, "Die grausame Affenmutter" ["The Cruel Monkey Mother"], 17-20.

peace and harmony" (Calvino 225). Anthony's struggle to become crown prince must be the active problem because it is the only problem that accounts for all the action in the story.

I would like to use the term "situation" to designate the initial balance, disturbance, and active problem combined. "Situation" refers to all that has transpired in a story up to the point at which the protagonist must take action against the active problem. Thus, situation is a part of the action, referring to the acts, events, and conditions of the story's beginning. For instance, the situation of "Monkey Palace" is the king's uncertainty as to which son is heir, the suddenly competitive relationship between the two sons, and the contest of presents.

What the protagonist is trying to achieve by attempting to change the situation is called his *super-objective* (Heggie).⁷ The prefix "super" is to distinguish it from his or her other minor objectives that change from scene to scene. For example, in "Monkey Palace" Anthony's super-objective is to become crown prince. An objective is to find a bride. Gawain's super-objective is to stay alive. Dimitri's super-objective in *The Brothers Karamazov* is to win Grushenka. It is *not* Macbeth's super-objective to kill Duncan. If it were, the play would be over in the second act. The super-objective must span the entire

⁷ For a closely related use of the term, see Stanislavsky 271-80.

action of the story. Thus, Macbeth's super-objective is to become and remain king.

The active problem can only be resolved through action. In this thesis "action" is used in two senses. The first is Aristotle's sense, designating the concept of the complete form of what happens (39; ch. 7). It is roughly synonymous with the common usage of "story". The second is as a collective noun meaning the events that occur in a story, usually the acts taken by the characters. "Act", on the other hand, applies only to those doings performed by characters that either complicate or work towards resolving the active problem.⁸ Acts always deal directly with it or its consequences. For example, Anthony riding off to look for a bride and his agreement to the marriage proposal are acts.

Doings unrelated to the active problem can be called "behaviour" (Heggie). Anthony's game of bridge on his first night in the monkey kingdom, for example, is behaviour. Presumably Anthony's objective in playing bridge is to win or to divert himself. The bridge game does not deal with the active problem in any way and does not affect the resolution.

Speeches and dialogue are acts when they complicate or help resolve the active problem. Mark Antony's famous speech to the plebeians in *Julius Caesar* (3.2.78-234), for example, is an act not because

⁸ Adapted from Heggie's definition of action: "Accomplishing tasks in pursuit of the super-objective."

the plebeians subsequently attack Caesar's assassins, but because it is an *attempt to manipulate* the crowd against the conspirators and thereby complicates the active problem of the play. Thus, Mark Antony's speech would have been an act even had it failed to incite the crowd.

On the other hand, the thoughts and opinions of the characters are not acts, because by themselves they cannot complicate or resolve the active problem. They may certainly give us insight into a character or into the reasons for his acts. Nevertheless, because on their own they cannot affect the outcome, they are inactive. For example, Hamlet discovers Claudius praying alone and unprotected. He makes to kill him. Then all of a sudden it occurs to him that if he kills Claudius in the midst of his prayers, the king will not go to hell. Hamlet hates Claudius and wants him to go to hell, so he decides to wait until he can kill Claudius when the king is in a state of sin. He puts away his weapon and passes on, leaving his uncle unmolested. Now, the reasons for which Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius are extremely interesting, but they are irrelevant to the *action* of the play; his reasons themselves do not affect that action. Hamlet could have given a different reason for not killing Claudius without changing the outcome in the slightest. And indeed, Shakespeare offers no guarantee that the motives Hamlet gives are his actual motives. The reasons he gives could, for example, be an elaborate

process of self-delusion by which he hides his own indecisiveness from himself. And, in fact, one could think of any number of other interpretations. A different motive for Hamlet's forbearance would, of course, change the play and perhaps some of the impressions that it makes as well. However, what matters in terms of the action is the act of passing on and leaving Claudius alive. Of course it would be foolish to conclude that Hamlet need have no reason at all for not killing Claudius just as long as he does not actually do it. It is important that Hamlet give *some* reason for passing on so that his acts appear comprehensible and "necessary". The second and third chapters contain fuller discussions of motivations as part of the cause-and-effect sequence. The point here is that just what the reasons are do not particularly matter in terms of action, because the disturbance can only be solved through acts not through thoughts.

The foregoing terms and concepts are clearly illustrated in another old folktale known as "The Happy Man's Shirt". A certain king has a son who is completely unhappy. No one including the prince himself can figure out why. Neither can anyone do anything to relieve his melancholy. The king offers his son a wife, plays, balls, concerts, singing, and so forth, all to no avail. The king sends out a decree over all the world asking for wise men to come and advise him. The wise men gather and after much consultation tell the king he must find a truly happy

man and have his son exchange shirts with him. The king's henchmen scour the earth looking for a truly happy man. First they bring in a priest. But when the king offers to make him his bishop, the priest accepts, betraying the fact that he is not truly happy. Next the king's men find a neighbouring king who seems like a happy man because he has everything. But it turns out he is worried about dying and having to leave all his possessions. The henchmen return empty-handed.

In desperation the king goes out hunting and wounds a hare. As he chases it, he hears a man singing so merrily at his work that he thinks he has surely come across a happy man. He offers the man all the wealth and power in his kingdom, which the man refuses, saying he is completely happy just as he is. Unable to contain himself, the king rips open the man's cloak to get at his shirt. But to his amazement, the happy man has no shirt (Calvino 117-19).⁹

In this tale the disturbance, of course, is the prince's unhappiness. However, the king is the protagonist as he is the one who acts to find a way to resolve the problem. First he throws parties and balls, then he calls together the wise men. He sends out his ambassadors to find a truly happy man. None of this works, so he goes hunting.

The hunting trip might at first seem like behaviour since the king seems to be abandoning the

⁹ For a Scottish analogue, see "The Happy Man's Shirt", Williamson and Williamson 86-92.

problem. But it is on the hunt that he discovers the happy man, and this discovery brings about the resolution--such as it is. Thus, "The Happy Man's Shirt" consists entirely of action. It contains no "behaviour" and no event could be removed without damaging the plot.

A much more complex story is Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Here the disturbance is the appearance of Emelye. It is *not* the complaint of the mourning women to Theseus. The first 150 or so lines of the poem that include this incident are not part of the complete unified action. They do not deal with the active problem: two men in love with the same woman. They deal with Creon's mistreatment of the mourners' dead--a problem which, in fact, does not belong to the same action.¹⁰

Before Emelye's appearance, the two friends, Palamon and Arcite, are merely languishing in a prison tower without ransom. The situation is balanced and thus dramatically inactive: "This passeth yeer by yeer and day by day" (1033). Then one morning Palamon spies Emelye, the Duke's sister-in-law, through the prison window. He is so smitten by her beauty he thinks she must be a goddess. Arcite, looking to see for himself, also falls instantly in love with Emelye. The two friends quarrel over her, each arguing he has the better right to claim her as his lady. However, they cannot *do* anything about it because they are locked up

¹⁰ See Aristotle 40; ch. 8.

in a tower. No amount of love proclamations or fine speech-making can resolve the problem or even change the situation. Arcite himself comments on the futility of their quarrel:

We stryve as dide the houndes for the
 boon;
 They foughte al day, and yet hir part was
 noon.
 Ther cam a kyte, whil that they were so
 wrothe,
 And baar away the boon bitwixe hem
 bothe. (1177-80)

As Arcite realises, their situation borders on the ridiculous because neither one of them can act. And indeed the story could not continue unless they somehow became capable of acting. Only through action can either one succeed or fail. As Aristotle puts it:

Tragedy is a representation not of people as such but of actions and life, and both happiness and unhappiness rest on action. (37; ch. 6)

The rest of the story's action is as follows: at the request of a friend Theseus suddenly releases Arcite but decrees he must never again set foot in Athens on pain of death. Arcite returns home but longs only for Emelye. In a dream a god visits him and tells him to return to Athens, where Emelye awaits him. Arcite goes back to Athens disguised as a commoner and works as one of Emelye's servants. Palamon escapes from prison, and the two meet and fight a duel. Theseus interrupts them and sets up a tournament to decide the dispute once and for all. The heroes offer prayers to the gods. Arcite defeats Palamon in the

fight but falls from his horse and dies. Theseus gives Emelye to Palamon.

Arcite's first act is to return to Athens. Palamon's first act is to escape from prison. But the first act of the story, excepting the disturbance, is Theseus's decision to release and banish Arcite. It both works in the direction of a resolution, by giving Arcite the power to act, and complicates the active problem for Arcite by making it extremely dangerous for him to approach his goal--Emelye.

By contrast, the relatively long "Philostrate" episode about Arcite's life as Emelye's servant (1413-45) counts entirely as behaviour, because Arcite's actual presence in Athens does not affect the outcome. He is never recognised nor ever declares his love to Emelye. Its only active purpose is to bring Arcite, Palamon, and Theseus into the same vicinity so as to set up the duel scene in the forest. However, the story-teller could have accomplished the same purpose by, for example, having Arcite merely set out for Athens. He could then stop in the woods to rest and there meet Palamon. All of the rest of the Philostrate story could be done away with without affecting the action in any way.¹¹

The end of a story comes soon after the resolution of the active problem. Typically (though not always),

¹¹ For a well-argued explanation of Chaucer's "episodic" structure and his tales' "public" nature, see Koff 11-36. See also Jordan 77-98 for a discussion of "disunity" in Chaucer with special reference to *Parliament of Fowls*.

the situation is shown to move back into some sort of balance, however uneasy. Resolution of the active problem means that the protagonist has got to do the thing he most dreaded (e.g. Gawain must keep his appointment with the Green Knight), or that he comes into a final confrontation with the forces that oppose him (e.g. Marlow finally reaches the Inner Station). In either case what the protagonist most values (within the bounds of the story) must be at risk before the story can end. Naturally resolution has nothing to do with whether or not he is successful.

The resolution and thus the end cannot come until the stakes are as high as possible, that is, until all aspects of the active problem hang in the balance.¹² For instance, at the beginning of Part Two of the *Knight's Tale* Palamon has escaped from prison and is hiding in the forest near Athens. Arcite chanced into the same wood and the two set up their fight to the finish. Ostensibly one or the other of them is going to die. Yet no matter what the outcome, this duel could by no means be the end of the story because it does not resolve all aspects of the active problem. At this point Palamon and Arcite are only fighting to get each other out of the way. Emelye is not yet the prize for victory. The winner would still have to find a way to get her. This would still be nearly impossible with the circumstances as they are at this point. The form

¹² Adapted from Heggie's definition of climax: "The last, biggest, riskiest action of the protagonist." See also Dürrenmatt 1: 193.

of the story would also change from that of a love triangle to that of a hero overcoming a series of obstacles before attaining his goal. His rival, then, instead of forming the whole problem, as he does in the *Knight's Tale*, would simply be one of several obstacles. It is only when Theseus proposes the tournament with Emelye as the prize that all aspects of the active problem stand to be resolved. Arcite and Palamon no longer simply fight to eliminate each other; they fight for *Emelye*. The scene in the forest thus cannot resolve the active problem. It can, however, compound the stakes. Because Duke Theseus makes all aspects of the active problem dependent on the tournament, the next meeting of the two rivals can be the decisive one.

The end follows the resolution naturally because the active problem ceases, for whatever the reason, to be a problem. In "Monkey Palace" the active problem is: Which twin ought to be crown prince? In the resolution, Anthony's bride reveals she is giving Anthony her own kingdom as dowry, so the problem ceases to be a problem, and the story calls for nothing further. The last line, "John inherited his father's kingdom and everybody lived in peace and harmony" (Calvino 222), confirms that balance has been restored. As noted above, "Monkey Palace" does not end when the monkey bride miraculously turns into a beautiful princess. Although this is arguably the climax of the story and solves a big worry, it leaves the active

problem unresolved, and the story must continue. Similarly, *Agamemnon* ends when the disturbance--*Agamemnon*--has been destroyed and the situation returns to a (very uneasy) balance.

By contrast, the *Knight's Tale* does not end with Arcite's death. The *Knight's Tale* is, of course, not "The Tragedy of Arcite". His death makes the resolution of the active problem possible, but the problem is only finally resolved when Theseus gives Emelye to Palamon in marriage.

Due perhaps to the influence of the novel, there exists a certain expectation in many minds that a story centre on a character rather than on an action and hence another expectation that the end of the story centre on the final fate of the main character. But in terms of plot-structure, the protagonist's fate is merely incidental. A story is the record of action resulting from a disturbance, not the record of a character's life or death. Hence, to cite one of many possible examples, we do not find out how Odysseus dies in Homer's *Odyssey* because his death does not belong to the story, i.e. not to the action.¹³

Aristotle identifies six essential elements of the tragedy: plot-structure, character, style, thought, spectacle, and lyric poetry. Of these, only the first four belong to a discussion of stories in general; the other two apply exclusively to the tragedy. Style also has little bearing on the subject of this thesis.

¹³ In this connection see Aristotle 40; ch. 8.

Character and thought, however, deserve attention because both of them are frequently treated as if they were more important elements of a story, especially of "literary" stories, than plot-structure.

Indeed, Aristotle's blunt assertion that action is more important than character has caused much heated dispute. However, most of the arguments and counter-arguments seemed to have missed Aristotle's point. As Butcher observed:

The question . . . is not whether one element [i.e. plot-structure] can, in logical analysis, be shown ultimately to contain the other [i.e. character]; we have rather to ask which of the two is the more fundamental as regards the . . . dramatic structure of a play. (348)

If the problem is looked at in this way, plot-structure is obviously the more fundamental. According to the definitions above, a story results from activity (a disturbance, for example,) and not from the qualities of the characters, since a character's qualities *alone* can neither set in motion nor change events. It is in this sense that action takes precedence over character.

This is not to overlook the importance of characters as sources of action. Naturally, an action requires an agent. But is an agent the same thing as a character? An agent may function quite effectively with no more "characterization" than his or her name or designation: the sister, John, the man in the field. This fact alone would seem to make Aristotle's point. Still, it has been argued that the mere naming of a imaginary being is characterization. But it would be

hard to think of a weaker or more nebulous way to characterise. What does "John" tell us about a character except, presumably, his gender?

Of course, many readers may prefer stories with detailed and individuated characters. Many readers may find such characters fascinating and derive much enjoyment from reading about their opinions and mannerisms and physical features and so on. Nevertheless, even in such stories, it is only the characters' acts, what they *do*, that make any difference in the outcome of the active problem.

Aristotle argues that acts are more important to a story than characterization because, he asserts, tragedy is a mimesis of life, and:

while men do have certain qualities by virtue of their character, it is in their actions that they achieve, or fail to achieve, happiness. (37; ch. 6)

Whether or not one agrees with Aristotle's understanding of life and "mimesis", it is self-evident that in a story only acts, not the qualities of the agents, will be capable of bringing the situation back to a final state of balance in the aftermath of the disturbance.

Similarly, plot-structure takes precedence over thought. "Thought" is used by Aristotle to designate "passages where people [i.e. characters] show that something is or is not the case, or present some universal proposition" (38; ch. 6). In this thesis, the sense of thought in Aristotle's usage is maintained

but also extended to include any discursive, contemplative (as opposed to narrative) or abstract passage in a story. For example, Marlow's comments about the Romans in Britain at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* (30-2, pt. 1) or Theseus's "Firste Moevere" speech at the end of the *Knight's Tale* (2987-3069) belong in the category of thought. Since thought, by this definition, is inactive, it obviously can neither create nor resolve a course of events by itself. Neither can thought be regarded as being somehow the content of the story and plot-structure as being primarily the means by which this content is conveyed. Plot-structure is both the form and the content of a story.

Care must be taken not to confuse thought with the term "theme". Thought is different from theme in that thought is expressed directly and abstractly by characters, narrator, or author on any number of subjects which may or may not bear on the action, while theme is always directly related to action. Indeed, theme arises out of the action. Although aspects of theme may also be explicitly expressed here and there in the language of the story, theme can only be found in the total *Gestalt* of the plot-structure.

For example, if I make up my mind to write a tale of great importance and then seize upon the two themes "faithfulness" and "fear of death", I obviously have not by any means devised a story. For, as Kundera points out, "themes are worked out steadily *within* and

by the story" (Art 83). However, if I create a situation in which the hero stands to be killed if he keeps a promise, the faithfulness/fear-of-death theme is built into my story automatically. It is implicit in my opening situation.

As used in this thesis, theme means, then, paraphrasing Kundera, an existential inquiry into certain key words or into the opposition of such words as expressed through the action (Art 84-5).

Theme, like thought and character, continues to receive relatively more scholarly attention than it warrants. It is often studied and discussed in the greatest abstraction almost as though it existed independently of the plot-structure from which, for the reader at any rate, it logically arises. This inflation of theme's importance is a great obstacle blocking the way to grasping a story's plot-structure and its means of unity, and thus to an understanding of the story. It is therefore necessary to make the relationships and distinctions between theme and plot-structure as clear as possible before proceeding any further.

Most of the rest of this chapter is concerned with the intricate relationship between action and theme. It defines theme at length by way of several stories, most particularly the *Knight's Tale*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Heart of Darkness*. It argues that theme, by nature, is interrogative rather than declarative, demonstrates how theme can be found in the

answer to the active question, and shows that the active question, in turn, depends upon the conditions of the situation. Finally, it examines an exception to these models which raises important questions about the structuring of action.

Theme as the Result of Action

The themes of "The Happy Man's Shirt" are happiness and searching. I have not arbitrarily chosen these words, nor arrived at them by any process of critical "interpretation".¹⁴ Rather, they follow naturally and unequivocally from the initial situation and the action: the king's super-objective is happiness for his son, and the acts he performs in order to achieve it, taken together, constitute a search.

A set of opposing themes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would be "fear of death" versus "trawthe".¹⁵ Again, these are concepts arising out of the action. The moment the Green Knight picks up his head, the price of Gawain's "trawthe" becomes his own death. Due to the previous events of the situation, Gawain has *promised* to deliver himself into the hands of a knight who, as far as he knows, will chop off his

¹⁴ The root of "interpret" is the Latin "interpres". Its first sense is "intermediary or go-between". (The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* uses "go-between" to define "panderer".) The etymology of "interpres" itself is unclear but "perhaps connected to 'pretium'" which in the first sense means "a penalty or punishment", and in the last sense "money given or received for dishonourable purposes" ("Interpres").

¹⁵ For a similar identification of themes, see Silverstein 278.

head. Hence his dilemma: how to stay alive and at the same time keep "trawthe". All the rest of the story's events can be divided either into Gawain's attempts to keep good faith or his attempts to keep alive.

Naturally, any number of examples of stories in which this subordination of theme to plot-structure seems to be reversed spring to mind, that is, stories in which the author appears to have manipulated the plot so as to illustrate a certain predetermined theme. Indeed, is it ever possible to tell if the plot-structure created the theme or the theme created the plot-structure, to know which is the chicken and which the egg?

If the question is which came first in a particular author's mind, we certainly have to admit that we as readers do not know unless the author has given some sort of indication in writings apart from the story proper. Beyond that, one can only hypothesise that a preconceived theme (granted the author had such) and the plot-structure changed and refined each other symbiotically in the process of writing and rewriting.

For the reader, however, theme inevitably comes through action. Theme expressed otherwise is secondary. For example, if, at the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the author had written a foreword stating that the story's theme was man's rebellion against the indifferent universe, this would not change the story's themes in the slightest. So

long as the action remained the same, the essential themes would not be rebellion against an indifferent universe but still "trawthe" and fear of death. For the same reason, even if one of the characters were to speak at length about man's rebellion against the indifferent universe, the themes would still be "trawthe" and fear of death (although such a speech might well change the context and the reader's final evaluation of the story).

Furthermore, in purely practical terms, the first requirement of a story is that it hold the reader's or listener's interest. This is essential if the story is to grip the audience at once and prevent it from turning to something more interesting. From the beginning a story must so captivate the readers or hearers that they must find nothing in the world as interesting as that story at that moment. If the story does not do so and the audience wanders away to something more interesting, the story is a failure no matter how profound its themes.¹⁶ Indeed, Aristotle goes so far as to assert that the plot-structure should even captivate people who only hear about the plot second-hand:

For the plot-structure ought to be so composed that, even without seeing a performance, anyone who hears the events which occur will experience terror and pity as a result of the outcome. (45; ch. 14)

¹⁶ For a related argument, see Koff 79.

Consequently, even in cases where an author does start from some great theme that he or she wants to explore by means of a story, he or she will inevitably have to devise a situation from which those questions will arise by, at the latest, the onset of the disturbance or else risk losing the audience. To quote Aristotle again:

Furthermore, if a poet strings together speeches to illustrate character, even allowing he composes them well in style and thought, he will not achieve the stated aim of tragedy. Much more effective will be a play with a plot and structure of events, even if it is deficient in style and thought. (38; ch. 6)

Milan Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, offers a helpful illustration of this principle. The first two chapters of the book deal exclusively with thought. They contain not even a scrap of a plot nor a single character. However, *discursively* they raise the themes of part 1 of the novel: Do our actions in life have any significance, any weight? Are they heavy or "unbearably light"? "Which one is positive, weight or lightness?" (*Being* 3-5).

The narrative, on the other hand, first begins in chapter 3 with the introduction of Tomas, the main character, at the onset of the disturbance as follows

(Tomas has had a short fling with a woman, Tereza, for whom he now feels an inexplicably strong love):

Standing by the window, he looked out over the courtyard at the walls opposite him and deliberated.

Should he call her back to Prague for good? He feared the responsibility. If he invited her to come, then come she would, and offer him up her life. (*Being 6*)

He cannot decide whether to commit himself to Tereza or not. This is the novel's active problem, and its connection to the themes made explicit in chapters 1 and 2 is clear enough. The important point is that in chapters 1 and 2 the problem is abstract and *passive*. It can be discussed and considered, but no decision need be made. In chapter 3, and more especially in chapter 4, the problem becomes concrete and *active*, because Tereza shows up on Tomas's doorstep. Now he must decide. He must act. And, in contrast to the theme exploration in the first two chapters, whatever Tomas does now will bear consequences, will make him, in short, either happy or miserable. When the narrative gets going, the theme questions become more vital, since something--namely, Tomas's happiness--is now at *risk*. Hence the action chapters are more compelling, more "effective", as Aristotle puts it, than the first two chapters of agile and recondite thought in which nothing is at risk. Thus, regardless of the sequence of composition or narration, for the reader, theme inevitably becomes vital through action.

Heart of Darkness provides a final example of how theme grows from action. As is well known, there are any number of differing opinions as to the themes of *Heart of Darkness*. Quite a few of them take Kurtz as somehow forming the thematic key to the tale. Leaving aside the question of whether this is true or not, it certainly is an odd notion considering how little Kurtz appears in the action.

Jacques Berthoud's *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase* is a typical example of this kind of thinking. Despite admirable sophistication, his interpretation exhibits the consequences of abstracting thought from its narrative context. Berthoud, like many others, devotes most of his critical attention to Kurtz's thought or to Marlow's thought about Kurtz and thereby overlooks most of the action of the story (which, of course, belongs to Marlow, not Kurtz)--as if the action were merely a platform from which Kurtz and Marlow can deliver speeches. Consequently, Berthoud's interpretation of theme is preoccupied with the such things as the "hold of civilization", "the consequences of abstracting men from their native contexts", and so forth (45).

This kind of interpretation slights not only the action, which, after all, is immensely entertaining and exciting, but also the intellectual power of Conrad's themes. For that power can hardly reside in the story's vague and muddled passages of thought. Rather, it grows from the drama of what happens.

In *Heart of Darkness* it is the themes "work" and "savagery"--the savagery of the wilderness, of the blacks and of the whites--which make up the story's thematic conflict. If this assertion is true, these themes must be in clear conflict throughout the entire action.

And indeed they are. Their opposition and centrality is made crystal clear, even before the action begins, in Marlow's preface to his story--his speculations about the ancient Roman colonisers of England. It is a kind of concentration of the story he is about to tell:

"What saves us is efficiency--the devotion to efficiency. But these chaps [the Romans] were not much account, really. They were no colonists; their administration was merely a squeeze, and nothing more, I suspect. They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force. . . . It was just robbery with violence." (31; pt. 1)

On the one hand Marlow sets efficiency or work and on the other hand "brute force" and "robbery with violence"--which I have abridged, for the sake of convenience, as "savagery".

Next, as Marlow begins his voyage aboard the French ship, it is "the idleness of a passenger" that first begins to sever him from "the truth of things" (40; pt. 1; emphasis added). It creates a "mournful and senseless delusion", he says. This feeling is at once contrasted with the vigorous health of the hard-working rowers in boats from the shore:

"You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration . . . they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement. . . . They were a great comfort to look at. For a time I would feel I belonged still to a world of straight-forward facts." (40; pt.1)

Marlow condemns the Company men, on the other hand, for their craving to get rich by stealing--without working in other words:

"The only real feeling was a desire to get appointed to a trading post where ivory was to be had, so that they could earn percentages. They intrigued and slandered and hated each other only on that account--but as to effectually lifting a little finger--oh, no." (54; pt. 1)

Confronted by the savagery of the Company as well as that of the wilderness, Marlow tries to puzzle out what it is that can hold a person from turning into a savage in the heart of darkness, in the "utter solitude without a policeman . . . where no warning voice of a kind neighbour can be heard whispering of public opinion" (85; pt. 2). He concludes, significantly, it is "the faith in your ability for the digging of unostentatious holes . . . your power of devotion, not to yourself, but to an obscure, back-breaking business" (86, pt. 2)--to work, in other words.

And work is exactly what Marlow does to keep himself human--he dredges up the sunken river boat, repairs its ripped hull, and makes it run again:

"I went to work . . . turning, so to speak, my back on that station. In that way only it seemed to me I could keep my hold on the redeeming facts of life." (52; pt. 2)

Likewise, it is significant that, although Marlow affirms Kurtz was a remarkable man because in his last moment "he had something to say" (i.e. "The horror!", 112; pt 3), Marlow is not prepared to admit Kurtz was worth even the loss of a rather unremarkable helmsman's life. But in what sense could the helmsman have been of greater worth than the multi-talented genius, Kurtz? Marlow tell his listeners:

"Perhaps you will think it passing strange, this regret for a savage who was of no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara. Well, don't you see, he had *done* something, he had steered." (87; pt. 2; emphasis added.)

The helmsman's great worth is that he had done something; he had worked. But of Kurtz, Marlow says, on the other hand, that he "had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing" (83; pt. 2). The helmsman had laboured, had done a necessary, if humble, job; Kurtz "was very little more than a voice" (84; pt. 2).

Most remarkably of all, Marlow gives two reasons for embarking on the journey in the first place, and they correspond exactly to the themes identified in the action. Marlow goes to Africa because he wanted work and because he was fascinated by the mystery, by the "darkness" of the region, by the wildness and all that goes with it, by savagery in other words, by "the fascination of the abomination . . ." (31; pt. 1). It is these two theme, then--work and savagery--which run through the entire action.

Theme as a Question

It might be objected that the themes I have discovered are too general and vague in every case to be useful. They say nothing about the *meaning* of the action. Indeed they do not. A theme is not a statement but a question. The action of a story asks what its themes mean. It *explores* the themes; it does not make declarative or conclusive statements about them. For example, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not declare that Gawain is guilty or not guilty of breaking his "trawthe". As Davenport astutely observes in *The Art of the Gawain-Poet*:

There is no insistence . . . that one should see the tale as illustrative of a moral maxim. Any sense of exemplification is only in what the reader may discern in the *working out* of the fable. (136; emphasis added)

The tale poses the question of Gawain's guilt or innocence to the reader.

Theme questions, then, are posed through the action, and action itself does not draw any conclusions. If the reader nevertheless insists on conclusions, as Brooks points out, it will have to be up to him or her "to assemble the elements of the narrative and determine what they mean" (33). In his explication of Aristotle's view of the same subject Halliwell writes, "Universals [i.e. general insights into the nature of things] are implicit in poetic

drama, but they are not there as a subject for assertion or firm belief" (Commentary 109).

"The Happy Man's Shirt" provides a particularly good example both of how themes are worked out in action and of the questioning nature of themes. The story's disturbance raises two questions. The first is an active question: How will the prince become happy? The second is a theme-question resulting from the first: What makes people happy? The answer to the second question, according to the wise men, is utterly simple and clear: A happy man's shirt. The active question, on the other hand, is never answered. Indeed, the story does not have an end, according to the definition given earlier, in that the active problem is not resolved. Nevertheless, "The Happy Man's Shirt" is effective as a story because it uses this lack of resolution to call into question the easy solution of the wise men. Consequently, it plants further questions in the reader's mind about its theme-word: happiness. It is an example of what Kundera calls the "wisdom of the novel", which is, by extension, the wisdom of the story in general:

A novel does not assert anything; a novel searches and poses questions. . . . The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything. . . . The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. (*Forgetting* 237)

Naturally, it is possible to try and determine exactly what the surprise ending of "The Happy Man's Shirt" is supposed to mean: You cannot find happiness

by setting out to look for it, or Happiness eludes us, or You cannot get happiness from someone else. But to make such statements is to say more--and at the same time much less--than "The Happy Man's Shirt" does. An action does not answer life's problems, it dramatises them.

Theme in the Answer to the Active Question

A story's themes are often already apparent in the situation, as illustrated by the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. And in every case the situation, that is, the action at the story's beginning, greatly affects, if it does not determine outright, the theme. As a further illustration, I shall consider how themes are determined by the situation in the *Knight's Tale*. As with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I shall look first of all at the disturbance, since this is the point where the active problem is introduced and where the conflict becomes clear.

In the *Knight's Tale* the disturbance occurs when Emelye shows up. Note that the disturbance could not be the imprisonment of Arcite and Palamon--no action follows from it. Furthermore, for all the reader knows their imprisonment is a *restoration*, not a disturbance, of order--maybe they deserve to be there. In any case, their imprisonment is not the disturbance but the initial balance. Things get going only because Arcite and Palamon both fall in love with the same woman.

This state of affairs, as everyone recognises, cannot continue. It must change. Says Theseus:

"Ye woot yourself she may nat wedden two
Atones, though ye fighten everemo.
That oon of you, al be hym looth or lief,
He moot go pipen in an yvy leef;
This is to seyn, she may nat now han bothe."
(1835-9)

And yet it is impossible for either hero willingly to give her up. For both of them the thing is a matter of life and death.

Palamon: "My lady, whom I love and serve,
And evere shal til that myn herte sterve."
(1143-4)
Arcite: "Syn that I may nat seen you Emelye,
I nam but deed; ther nys no remedye."
(1273-4)

This situation is, of course, the ubiquitous love triangle. It builds tragedy, or at least conditions for tragedy, into the plot right from the beginning since it leaves no way for everybody to get what he or she wants. Someone has to lose. This is, in fact, the same predicament as in "Monkey Palace". Just as Anthony and John desired the same kingdom, so Palamon and Arcite desire the same woman. In "Monkey Palace" the problem was resolved only when the object of desire was, in effect, duplicated: Anthony's bride had a spare kingdom on her hands. Both sons were satisfied, but only because they no longer wanted exactly the same thing. Anthony ceased to care about his father's kingdom. The situation changed, in other words. Had it remained the same, someone would have to have lost,

and there would have been no happy ending. In the *Knight's Tale*, of course, the situation does not change. To the last Arcite and Palamon still want the same thing--Emelye--and there cannot be two Emelyes. Thus, the situation stipulates, there will have to be one less hero.

Tension and suspense build immediately from this kind of beginning. Someone has to lose, but who will it be and how? Furthermore, the disturbance in the *Knight's Tale* has disrupted order in two other ways. First, it breaks a bond of loyalty since Palamon and Arcite are cousins and, additionally, brothers "ysworn ful depe" (1132), bound to help each other. Instead of this, they do their utmost to destroy each other. Second, it ruptures the peace and order of Theseus's realm (which keeps him busy trying to moderate and regulate the controversy right to the end). Theseus is absolutely right to view the two crazed lovers as a threat. They feel their passion sets them above all law, as Arcite asks bluntly:

"'who shal yeve a love a lawe?'
 Love is a gretter lawe, by my pan,
 Than may be yeve to any erthely man;
 And therefore positif lawe and swich decree
 Is broken al day for love in ech degree."
 (1164-9)

Thus, a triple-disturbance drives the *Knight's Tale*, creating and propelling all the action like a Big Bang in the microcosm of the story.

The active question that this triple-disturbance raises is not just: Who is going to win--Palamon or

Arcite? More importantly, it is: *How* will the winner win? How will he succeed, by what merit? The answers to these questions, *as contained in the action*, are the themes of the story.

Normally the question of how the winner will win would be decided by one of the two rivals proving himself in some way superior to, or more deserving of the woman than, the other. He would be stronger, or more honest, or more in love, or more virtuous, and so forth, than the other. However, in the *Knight's Tale* the question is made especially difficult since the two heroes are shown to be nearly equal. Each has a case for being the first to love Emelye. And on the evidence of their duel in the forest, they seem to be evenly matched in strength, fighting skill, and valour. Each seems to suffer just as much pain for Emelye as the other, and both are willing to risk everything to win her. Even the gods argue about which one should prevail.

Of course Palamon and Arcite are not indistinguishable. For example, they pray for very different things. And, arguably, Palamon does seem to enjoy a slight edge throughout, no doubt confirmed by his ultimate victory. But surely an interpretation such as William Frost's goes far too far in claiming that "the heroes are significantly differentiated from each other and a valid preference between them is implied by the poem" (290). If the suitors were not equal (nearly) there would be no difficulty deciding

between them. The good guy would simply wed Emelye after whipping the bad guy. But is the *Knight's Tale* a story about the conflict of good and evil? Clearly it is not.

How, then, is the problem resolved? After the interrupted fight to the death in the forest, Theseus undertakes to resolve the dispute by setting up what he intends to be a fair and civilised tournament with Emelye's hand as the prize. Under these conditions, the rivalry would have been decided by physical strength and fighting skill after all. However, during the prayer scene, each hero enlists the help of a different god. When each god, in turn, promises aid, the decision passes beyond the power of the human agents. No longer can the outcome be seen as being up to Palamon and Arcite; it becomes predetermined, or destined.

Consequently, according to the plan worked out in advance by Saturn, Palamon is overpowered in the event, and Arcite has apparently won Emelye as his wife. But his fatal fall from the horse decides the dispute at last in Palamon's favour. All of this is destiny, decreed by the gods, but to the characters themselves it looks like chance. Hence Arcite seems to have died and lost Emelye by a mishap (i.e. bad luck, chance), and the winner, Palamon, has won by what appears to all the characters to be chance but which, the reader is shown, is actually destiny.

Thus, "chance" and "destiny" become two themes of the *Knight's Tale*, for they emerge as two descriptions for the resolution of the active problem as well as the cause of many of the story's events.

Judging by the action of the *Knight's Tale*, there is finally no reasonable or knowable explanation for why Palamon wins and Arcite loses other than destiny/chance/gods. It is apparent at once that these themes, these answers to the active question, seem themselves to be more like questions than explanations, for, if Arcite was destined to lose, why was he destined to lose? However, this refusal to provide a final explanation is only in keeping with the inquiring nature of theme, and perhaps of action, itself. This topic will be pursued further in the second chapter.

Active Question and Conditions of the Situation

With a more thorough definition of theme, and after a close look at examples of theme being worked out "within and by the story", stories with the same basic type of situation can now be compared. The point of the comparison is to see how variations in the conditions of the situation determine which questions the action is capable of posing.

For example, one might compare Sir Gawain's dilemma to that of Prince Myshkin in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. Prince Myshkin loves both Aglaya and Nastasya Filipovna but cannot have both, while Gawain wants to keep his word and keep alive but cannot have both.

Myshkin has a free choice between two women that he loves but does not know which choice to make. He does not know what to do.

Gawain on the other hand has, in effect, no choice. He is bound by chivalry to keep his appointment with the Green Knight, and he never seriously considers not keeping it. Indeed the possibility is only even raised once when Gawain's guide to the Green Chapel urges Gawain to run away and then swears to hush the whole thing up. But Gawain never falters:

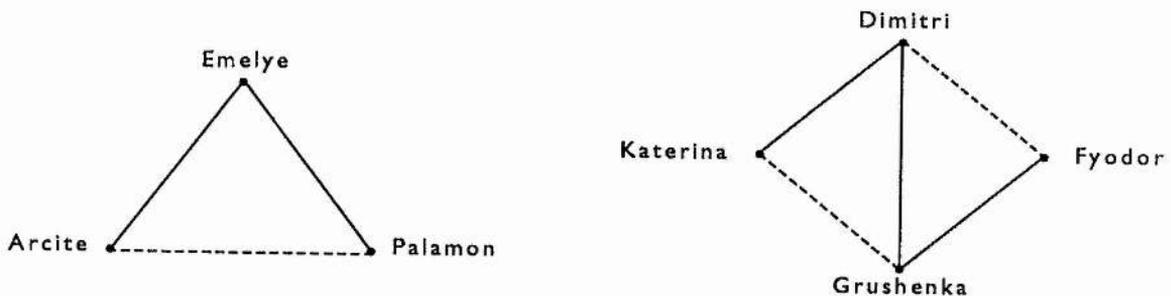
Bot helde thou hit never so holde, and I here
 passed,
 Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme that thou
 telles,
 I were a knyght kowarde, I myght not be excused.
 (2129-31)

What Gawain should do, then, is quite clear; the question is whether or not he will do it.

To state the difference in other words, Myshkin must try to find out what is right and what it is he wants; the questions are: What is right? and: What does Myshkin really want? Gawain on the other hand must try to do the right; the question is: Will he be able to do it? Thus, conditions in the situation, in this case uncertainty or certainty of what is "right" on the part of the protagonist, determine that *The Idiot* is full of Myshkin's thoughts and inner struggles, while *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* focuses on exterior struggles--Gawain's temptations and his deeds.

This comparison can be extended by examining the love triangles in Dostoyevsky's novels *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* and contrasting them to the love triangle in the *Knight's Tale*. Naturally, not all of the differences between the three stories come from the differences between the three situations. For instance, it is a commonplace that Dostoyevsky was intent on understanding the souls and minds of his characters, their "psychological" motivations, a conception which is mostly absent from the *Knight's Tale*. Nevertheless, to a great degree, the depths of the psychological explorations within his novels are made possible by the extreme situations in which he places those characters in the first place.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, there are in fact two overlapping love triangles, not just one. They can be diagrammed and compared with the *Knight's Tale* as follows (solid lines indicating love, dashed lines rivalry):



Now, we know, without having to think much about it, that the Dimitri-Grushenka-Fyodor triangle is the

main interest of the story. This is due to the situation and does not result from the qualities of the characters. Dimitri, Grushenka, and Fyodor do not make an inherently more interesting trio than Katerina Ivanovna, Dimitri, and Grushenka. Katerina Ivanovna, for example, is certainly a more fully developed and more complex character than Fyodor. The motives behind her dealings with Grushenka and Dimitri, to say nothing of her ambiguous feelings towards Alyosha, in short her "psychology", are extremely complex. Yet her role in the story remains secondary. What happens between her and Dimitri is less important than what happens, for example, between Dimitri and Fyodor. The reason for this lies not in "psychology" or character but simply in the circumstance that Dimitri is Fyodor's son.

This condition itself makes the situation inherently dramatic and compelling. We are naturally captivated and shocked by a situation in which a father and his son compete so fiercely for the same woman that they are ready to murder each other.¹⁷ And we would have this reaction no matter what the characters were like.

In effect, this condition adds a second archetypal conflict--rivalry between father and son--to the first (the love triangle).¹⁸ The Katerina-Dimitri-Grushenka triangle has no such tension because Katerina Ivanovna

¹⁷ For a similar line of reasoning, see Holquist 176-91.

¹⁸ See Belknap 69-70 for a short discussion of the archetypal aspect of the conflict.

and Grushenka have no relationship other than their rivalry nor any desire to kill each other. Or, to put it in different terms, the Dimitri-Grushenka-Fyodor triangle is not only impossible (two men love the same woman), but intolerable as well (they are father and son). When the two rivals in the triangle have a close relationship apart from rivalry (e.g. father and son, lord and vassal, husband and wife, two friends), the outcome becomes far more crucial, because the stakes are higher.

What must be sought are cases where suffering befalls bonded relations--when brother kills brother . . . son kills father, mother kills son, or son kills mother. (Aristotle 46; Ch. 14.)¹⁹

In other words, such cases imbue the action with a universality and importance similar to that of myth. This is exactly the effect that Dostoyevsky has achieved. Bakhtin calls *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, "a maximally intensified and universalized treatment of the theme of patricide" (144; emphasis added).²⁰

By comparison, the triangle in the *Knight's Tale* contains no such condition (e.g. no "bonded relation") to create further thematic complexity. It is true that Palamon and Arcite are cousins who have sworn brotherhood to each other. Nevertheless, familial loyalty and disloyalty do not belong to the themes of the story. Palamon and Arcite appear first and

¹⁹ See also Scholes and Kellogg 234.

²⁰ See also 149.

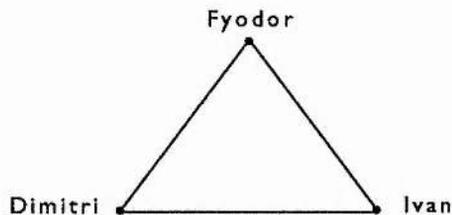
foremost as rivals and that is the only active relationship they have for the reader. Although Palamon makes much of the sworn brotherhood during the situation, any sort of brotherhood quickly disappears from the story and is never an active force in the way the Fyodor-Dimitri relationship is. Why is this so?

Again the answer lies in the conditions of the situation. Friendship, let alone brotherhood, between Palamon and Arcite is not mentioned until after the disturbance has set them at each other's throat. They begin to quarrel in their very first scene. In addition, the first and only mention of their friendship and brotherhood comes as Palamon tries to bolster the validity of his claim to have Emelye for himself. Therefore this condition never really develops into a conflict, much less a theme. In his book *The Birth of Expectation*, Don Lepam has suggested that "the difference between . . . plots that are 'adequately motivated' and plots which we feel are 'inadequately motivated' is that in the former case intentions are revealed before action . . ." (177). The same point may be applied to the "brotherhood" of Palamon and Arcite in this case. We do not take it seriously because it comes after the fighting has already started. Besides, whatever Palamon says about friendship is as nothing compared to the enmity being fought out in gory detail throughout the story. Neither is the breach of a sworn brotherhood as intolerable as, say, the enmity of two blood brothers

would be. Of course it is difficult, not to say impossible, to know how seriously Chaucer intended Palamon's allusion to their oath to be taken. A sworn brotherhood and the duties it required no doubt meant more to a medieval reader than they do to a modern one. Still, Palamon clearly manipulates their oath of brotherhood to serve his own ends.

Of course no great love is ever established between Dimitri and Fyodor Karamazov either. But it does not need to be because a natural bond already exists in that Dimitri is Fyodor's son. Furthermore, Dostoyevsky takes three whole chapters detailing family relations among the Karamazovs, including one chapter exclusively about Dimitri and his father, before ever introducing the disturbance--their quarrel. Consequently, we take the conflict seriously, and it can stand at the centre of the plot.

The situation of the *The Brothers Karamazov* is extremely complex and includes other triangles, most notably a hate triangle:



This situation, on the first level, poses the question, Which brother will kill Fyodor? On a different level it asks the question: For what reason might each of the brothers murder his father? Here

again the situation is inherently compelling because the potential killers and victim are not just any three men, but a father and his sons.²¹ Although the appeal of Dostoyevsky's novels is often said to lie in their profound grasp of human "psychology", it does not seem likely readers would care so much about the psychology of Ivan and Dimitri if they were not involved in a hate triangle with their father and one of them bound to kill him. In other words, it is because the characters are placed in a compelling situation involving sex and murder--acts--that their psychology begins to matter.²²

In *The Idiot* the conditions of the triangular situation stipulate a different set of questions. As noted above, it presents the dilemma: Should Prince Myshkin marry the wicked woman he hopes he can rescue (Nastasya Filipovna) or the good girl who would make him happy (Aglaya)? The active question is: *How* will he choose the one or the other? What are his motives? We care about his motives because he is in a position in which he has to choose between two very different women. He has agency.

No one in the *Knight's Tale* is in the same position. Emelye has two suitors, but they are very much alike, and which one she will marry is not up to her. Palamon and Arcite have already irreversibly chosen Emelye, and therefore their reasons for doing so are peripheral. The *Knight's Tale* asks: Who will win

²¹ See Mochulsky 569 for a similar point of opinion.

²² For a contrasting view of situation and character, cf. Lodge 17.

Emelye? *The Idiot* asks: Whom will Myshkin choose? Consequently, *The Idiot* must take on the whys and wherefores of choice. *The Knight's Tale* does not because no one is choosing. Its situation pits two virtually equal contenders against one another. One must win and one must lose. "'Ye shul noon oother ende with me maken, / That oon of yow ne shal be deed or taken'" (1865-66). Thus, situation decides that the *Knight's Tale* deal with the mysterious how and why of things happening, *The Idiot* with the equally mysterious how and why of a character making a choice. Clearly it is the difference in the conditions of the initial situation--specifically the characters' ability or lack of ability to choose--which determines a difference in the theme.

Alternative Development of Action: Journey Stories

It has been demonstrated that the conditions of the situation determine what sort of question the action is capable of posing and that theme, in turn, can be found in the answer to this active question. This model works well with plot-structures that have a clear disturbance which makes an active problem and poses an active question. I call this traditional and very prevalent type of plot-structure "dramatic"--due to its similarity to classical drama. Its merits are obvious enough from the stories discussed thus far.

Naturally, the dramatic plot-structure is not the only way of developing action. Aristotle, for example,

refers to an "episodic" plot-structure which he understandably deems inferior to the dramatic because the order of its events "is neither probable nor necessary" (41; ch. 9). In the *Poetics*, then, there are plots that are unified by necessary and probable causation and those that are not. The next chapter will return to this issue.

However, it is also possible to think of story genres in which action, by the very nature of the genre, develops neither dramatically nor episodically. The journey story is such a genre. In the journey story the parameters of the action may be imprecise, the active question vague, and the theme unclear until well into the story. Nevertheless it typically still possesses a beginning, middle, and end and is still able to centre on the resolution of a problem rather than, say, on the life of a character, or even on the mere sequential recounting of what happened on the trip. In other words, it possesses unity of action.

In this final section of the chapter I compare and contrast the way in which disturbance and theme develop in two journey stories: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Heart of Darkness*. Despite the great chronological distance separating them, they invite comparison, for they share some rather striking characteristics.

The most notable of these is the nature of the journey in each story. Both Gawain and Marlow leave civilization far behind and travel deep into a hostile and forbidding wilderness:

Rivers, streams of death in life, whose banks were rotting into mud, whose waters, thickened into slime, invaded the contorted mangroves, that seemed to writhe . . . (*Darkness* 41; pt. 1)

The hasel and the hawthorne were
 harled al samen
 With roghe raged mosse rayled aywhere,

Brokes byled and breke bi bonkkes aboute,
 Schyre schaterande on schores ther thay doun
 schowved.

(*Gawain* 744-5, 2082-3)

Further, both Gawain and Marlow are trying to find a strange, elusive, and powerful man. Both the Green Knight and Kurtz have the power and the tendency to behead people. The physical search for their antagonists leads both Gawain and Marlow to a journey deep into his own heart. Both prove their courage in the face of violent death, and yet each finds himself morally lacking in the end. And in both cases this moral weakness comes through the telling of a lie.

Gawain and Marlow are, of course, the protagonists in each tale. Kurtz and the Green Knight fulfill similar functions as the objects towards which the protagonists respectively journey. Gawain's stay at the castle corresponds in some respects to Marlow's sojourn at the Central Station. Finally, the Green Chapel corresponds to the Inner Station as the location of the denouement and the "heart of darkness", so to speak, for each protagonist.

Yet despite all these similarities, the plot-structures themselves are essentially different, again reflecting, above all, significant differences in the nature of the situations. The plot-structure of *Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight is dramatic, that of *Heart of Darkness* non-dramatic.

As noted earlier, the disturbance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be precisely located:

If any so hardy in this hous holdes hymselfen,
 Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
 That dar stifly strike a strok for an other,
 I schal gif hym of my gyft thys giserne ryche,
 This ax, that is heve innogh, to hondele as
 hym lykys,
 And I schal bide the fyrst bur, as bare as I
 sitte.

If any freke be so felle to fonde that I telle,
 Lepe lyghtly me to, and lach this weppen--
 I quit-clayme hit for ever, kepe hit as his auen.
 And I schal stonde hym a strok, stif on this flet,
 Elles thou wyl dight me the dom to dele hym an
 other, barlay;
 And yet gif hym respite
 A twelmonyth and a day. (285-98)

Since everyone is too frightened by this "aghlich mayster" to stir, King Arthur himself accepts the challenge. Gawain, entering, significantly, the story for the first time in response to the disturbance, beseeches the king to let him play the Green Knight's game. The Green Knight then adds a further condition-- that Gawain must seek him out "'where-so thou hopes / I may be funde upon folde'" (395-6) and there receive the return blow. Gawain agrees, takes up the axe and chops off the Green Knight's head with a single blow. But to everyone's amazement, the body of the Green Knight simply picks up the severed head and climbs back into the saddle. At precisely the moment in which the Green Knight picks up his head the conflict is clear: Gawain's *trawthe* and life are the stakes. As Burrow

puts it: "Once the Green Knight has survived the blow, it seems clear that the hero has bound himself 'by his seker trawthe' to seek out his own death . . . "

(25).²³ Thus, Gawain's position is immediately desperate. The active problem comes upon him in one fell swoop.

In stark contrast to the situation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the conflict in *Heart of Darkness* emerges very slowly. Indeed it is not at first identifiable in the situation at all. What is Marlow up against? Who or what is opposing him? What is at stake? These questions cannot be answered until one has read far into the story. *Heart of Darkness* does not begin with a disturbance per se posing an active problem. Rather, the active problem grows by degrees out of a continuing action, and the active problem only becomes clearly identifiable at the Central Station.

Nevertheless, as noted above, the situation does indeed introduce a problem--lack of a job. And the resolution of this problem--going to Africa--introduces the thematic conflict: work versus savagery. The situation as Marlow tells it is this:

I had . . . just returned to London after a lot of Indian Ocean, Pacific, China Seas . . . and I was loafing about. . . . It was very fine for a time, but after a bit I did get tired of resting. Then I began to look for a ship--I should think the hardest work on earth. But the ships wouldn't even look at me. And I got tired of that game, too. (32; pt. 1)

²³ See also 23-4 and 161.

Next, Marlow happens across a map of Africa in a shop window. He remembers he has always wanted to go to Africa; since he was a boy it had seemed to him a blank space, "a delightful mystery". He notices a certain large river "resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea. . . . it fascinated me as a snake would a bird." (33; pt. 1).²⁴ So he sets about getting a job as a river boat captain from the trading company that operates on this river.

Yet this initial problem of Marlow's is not an active problem by my definition because it cannot account for all of the story's action. And it certainly does not form a disturbance in the sense used so far. The situation does not make Marlow desperate; he is not caught between loss of his virtue and loss of his life like Gawain. He is just fed up with resting and with unemployment. Marlow's unemployment is a kind of mini-disturbance because it puts him on the road to the Inner Station, so to speak, where the main conflict becomes clear.

To put it another way, unlike Gawain, Marlow has no super-objective at this point in the story. The objectives resulting from the situation--find work, get to Africa--he accomplishes relatively quickly. It is obvious they can in no way account for the entire action of the story. Nevertheless, this situation does start Marlow moving gradually into a situation that

²⁴ For a recent interpretation of this disturbance in terms of myth, see Guth 156.

becomes more and more unpleasant and corrupt and that will have become intolerable and require action by the time he has reached the Central Station.

This progression can be traced as follows. It begins when, after securing a post with the Company, Marlow travels to the continent to meet his employers. The city there seems to him "a whited sepulchre" (35). At the Company headquarters he runs into the two dark and menacing knitting women and is examined by a somewhat sinister doctor. "I began to feel slightly uneasy", he says, and "An eerie feeling came over me" (36, 37; pt. 1). Approved for the journey, Marlow sets out for the river in a French steamer which unloads soldiers and customs officers all down the African coast. It seems depressing and futile to Marlow and, along with the "monotonous grimness" of the coast, increases his unease (39; pt. 1). In fact, he begins to feel he is losing contact with reality:

The idleness of a passenger, my isolation amongst all these men with whom I had no point of contact, the oily and languid sea, the uniform sombreness of the coast, seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion. (40; pt.1)

This mood does not improve:

The general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me. It was like a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares. (41; pt. 1)

At the first company station he finds chain gangs, chaos, disease, and a grove of death. He foresees that in this land he will "become acquainted with a flabby,

pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly" (43; pt. 1). On the trek into the Central Station he passes abandoned villages, and the carriers in his caravan die from exhaustion or run away. But at the Central Station itself, where he must spend three months, Marlow's revulsion grows even worse: "A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse. . . . I've never seen anything so unreal in my life" (52; pt. 1).

Thus, Marlow falls gradually into the intolerable, evil situation he winds up in at the Central Station. And an active problem emerges slowly and hazily as a result. The problem is: How to find Kurtz? Marlow comes to believe that talking with Kurtz will bring relief from his spiritual oppression at the hands of the Company as well as some illumination as to the meaning of this suffering. Thus, the physical struggle to reach the Inner Station and Marlow's search for relief become the same problem, the active problem.

Nevertheless, it differs from the active problem of a dramatic plot-structure in that it covers only the events from Marlow's arrival at the Central Station onward, whereas the active problem in a dramatic plot-structure covers the entire action.

The effect of this slow complication and slow revelation of the active problem is that attention is bound to focus on it, on the problem, on the evil, on the darkness, on its "horror". So much of the book is given over to establishing the problem that, in a

sense, the disturbance itself nearly becomes the centre of attention.

The *Gawain* story-teller, on the other hand, creates the disturbance--an evil--very quickly: the Green Knight just busts in the door. There is no time for Gawain to brood over the nature of evil; he has to jump up and face the Green Knight. Thus, the wrongfulness of the disturbance and its meaning are simply taken for granted. For Gawain, the disturbance is a simple case of the good guys (Camelot) versus the bad guy, or at least the discourteous guy. The action does not focus on what makes the disturbance wrong but on how to resolve it. Thus, "trawthe" and "fear"--words relating to Gawain--are the themes, not "darkness" or "horror"--words relating to the disturbance.

For the same reason, the crucial events in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*--the temptation and the meeting at the Green Chapel--come when Gawain has already reached the *end* of the journey, when he has arrived. His travels are a kind of accompaniment to them, a setting for them. Thus, his adventures along the way are mentioned far more hurriedly than in Marlow's journey up the river, and only in passing:

At uche warthe other water ther the wywe passed
 He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,
 And that so foule and so felle that feght hym
 byhode.

So mony mervayl bi mount ther the mon fyndes,
 Hit were to tore for to telle of the tenthe dole.
 (715-19)

Since the problem is so clear from the situation, we know from the start that the resolution is bound to come in a direct encounter with the Green Knight, not with some minor monster along the way.

On the other hand, Marlow's trials--raising the boat, enduring the "vile" moral atmosphere of the Central Station, the attack on the river boat--come while he is actually still en route. Indeed most of the events that resolve the active problem happen on board the boat. To put the difference succinctly, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* it is the disturbance that forces the journey; in *Heart of Darkness* it is the journey that gradually brings on the disturbance.

Nevertheless, the plot-structure of *Heart of Darkness* is just as much unified by action as that of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It tells the story of the resolution of an active problem--how to find Kurtz/relief/illumination. Though this problem only crystallises somewhere in the middle of the tale, it nevertheless has its origin, as with the other plot-structures examined above, in the situation, not at the point where the active problem becomes clear. Consequently, the thematic conflict also springs from the situation just as in dramatic plot-structure.

It is clear, then, that unity of action is not limited to the dramatic plot-structure as formulated by Aristotle. The *Poetics* stipulates the necessity of an exclusively cause-and-effect sequence as the basis for a unified action. But a story like *Heart of Darkness*,

with a clear, unified action which is nevertheless developed on a basis other than strict cause and effect, puts this requirement into some doubt. Why did Aristotle hold cause and effect to be so vital to the concept of unity of action? What are its merits and drawbacks? These questions belong to the next chapter.

Chapter II

Causation, Lucidity, and Fallibility

The action of the dramatic plot-structure, as defined above, is causal by nature. Chapter I established the disturbance as the first cause from which the conflict, the theme, and the rest of the events result. According to Aristotle, this causal plot-structure, in which each event clearly results from a previous event inside the story, produces an action which is lucid and understandable to the spectators. Lucidity, in turn, is necessary in order to generate the release of powerful emotions in the audience. Aristotle takes this release to be the aim of tragedy.¹

However, Aristotle's conception of causal unity rests on the assumption that the causes of action as well as its results are in fact human. Many stories, including Greek tragedies, call this assumption into question by dealing with events and causes which are not human, for example, with chance and the will of the gods. In other words, many plot-structures that make use of events with no human cause still achieve the effects of tragedy that Aristotle specifies--the release of powerful emotions including pity and fear.

¹ See Aristotle 37; ch. 6.

In this chapter I will argue that the use or exclusion of non-human causes is not the most important factor determining the effectiveness of a story's action. More decisive is the protagonist's *fallibility*, that is, the degree to which he transforms his fortunes from prosperity to adversity or vice versa through his own acts.² Fallibility ensures that the action remains *essentially* lucid and causal even when the plot-structure includes obscure, non-human causes. Further, it generates the release of powerful emotions through irony. Irony here refers to conditions in which the characters themselves bring about a transformation from good to bad fortune. The plot-structure itself will be able to elicit pity, fear, mirth, and so forth from the audience when it is clear that the protagonist has played a key role in bringing about this transformation. Under such circumstances, plot-structures can, in fact, accommodate a fair amount of irrational or non-human causes; indeed the supernatural itself can function towards achieving the aforementioned emotional effects.

This chapter begins by analyzing how action functions in the dramatic plot-structure that Aristotle recommends in order to comprehend its merits. I turn then to stories with plot-structures which contain non-humanly caused events. However, first I will need to briefly define further terms of plot-structure. The following are essentially Aristotelian usages with

² See Halliwell, Glossary: "Hamartia" 190.

occasional modifications and additions as noted. These terms are, of course, particularly derived from Greek tragic practice and therefore not always applicable to modern and medieval stories. Nevertheless they provide clear, basic distinctions which will come in handy at least as reference points in comparing various kinds of plot-structures.

Terms

"Plot" is the arrangement of events in a story.³ This is a broad and admittedly simple definition of the term but has therefore the advantages that Edwin Muir pointed out: "It can be used in the widest popular sense. It designates for everyone, not merely for the critic, the chain of events in a story and the principle which knits it together" (16).

The action which a plot organises consists of two parts: "complication" and "denouement" (Aristotle 51-2; ch. 18). The complication stretches from the beginning of the story to the beginning of the transformation. The denouement extends from the beginning of the transformation to the end. This is a somewhat more inclusive definition of denouement than that common in contemporary usage. Holman, for example, defines it as "the final unravelling of the plot" (150). "Transformation", in turn, is the sequence of action in

³ See Aristotle 37; ch. 6.

which the protagonist moves from prosperity to adversity or vice versa (Aristotle 40; ch. 7).⁴

Although these definitions may seem somewhat complicated at first glance, their sense is in fact fairly close to the everyday usages of the words. The complication, for example, is that portion of the action in which the active problem becomes more and more complicated and in which problems multiply. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for instance, it includes everything up to Gawain's arrival at the Green Chapel, for up to this point his problems only get more complex.

Denouement means, of course, "unravelling", that is, outcome or resolution of the active problem. Aristotle is right to locate its beginning at the transformation, since, plainly, it is the resolution of the active problem that will determine the protagonist's ultimate fate.

For example, as noted earlier, Gawain's active problem can only be solved when he reaches the Green Chapel and meets the Green Knight for the second time. Therefore the transformation of his fortunes can only begin there, marking--according to the definition above--the beginning of the denouement. There is a sense in which the transformation begins at Bertilak's castle, since the acceptance of the green girdle is vital to the transformation of Gawain's fortunes.

⁴ For a similar treatment of the notion of transformation, see Todorov 232-3.

However, in Gawain's mind, and in the mind of the unsuspecting reader, events at the castle are not connected to the active problem until the final revelations are made at the Green Chapel.

Aristotle also distinguishes between the "complex" and the "simple" plot-structure (42-3; ch. 11). The complex plot is one in which the transformation involves a recognition or a reversal, while the simple plot contains neither. Aristotle defines recognition as

a change from ignorance to knowledge, bringing the characters into either a close bond, or enmity, with one another, and concerning matters which bear on their prosperity or affliction. The finest recognition occurs in direct conjunction with reversal. (43; ch. 11)

The Green Knight's revelation of his identity with Bertilak, the lord of the castle and Gawain's erstwhile host, is a recognition that makes the plot-structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* complex, since it is closely connected to Gawain's final transformation to a state of nagging unhappiness.

Reversal (*peripeteia*), on the other hand, is a somewhat more complicated concept. Aristotle defines it as "a complete swing in the direction of the action . . ." (42; ch. 11). Halliwell glosses the term as "a complete and startling twist in the direction of a dramatic action" (Glossary 195). In his commentary he clarifies:

Reversal entails a complete contradiction of expectation and intention on the part of the agents (and also, to the extent that they sympathise imaginatively, on that of an audience). . . .

. . . the crucial factor is that the direction of the action is tragically overturned, and gives rise to the very opposite of what it seemed set to produce. (116-17)

Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle is a reversal in this sense. By taking it, he hopes to triumph, but, of course, this act does just the opposite. It brings about his apparently lasting unhappiness. The example which Aristotle himself cites comes from Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*

where the person comes to bring Oedipus happiness, and intends to free him from his fear about his mother; but he produces the opposite effect, by revealing Oedipus' identity. (42; ch. 11)

The direction of Oedipus's action is toward finding out who he is. His unhappiness is brought about not because the action suddenly goes in the opposite direction--toward ignorance--but because it continues in the direction he wishes. This is what is meant by reversal.

Since Aristotle's terms are derived primarily from Greek dramatic practice, it is natural that not all stories contain recognitions and reversals nor always lend themselves to the complication--transformation--denouement model. Yet, as will be seen, plot-structures frequently do contain elements which, if not conforming exactly to Aristotle's conceptions, are at least analogous.

The words "crisis" and "climax" are not found in the *Poetics* but will nevertheless be useful for my purposes. "Crisis", according to Holman's definition, is "the episode or incident wherein the situation in which the protagonist finds himself is sure either to improve or grow worse" (129). It is thus closely related to the transformation and sometimes identical to it but is usually more specific, more limiting. It is a single event. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle, since with it Gawain's situation is sure to improve--he now has a hope of not having his head chopped off--and also grow worse--he becomes blameworthy.

Climax differs from crisis in that climax designates "the point of highest interest, the point at which the reader makes his greatest emotional response" (Holman 102). The climax is the most exciting point in the story.

Crisis and climax do not always occur in the same place. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, the climax is, of course, the Green Knight's apparently earnest attempt to chop off Gawain's head. It is the high point of tension and excitement:

He lyftes lyghtly his lome and let hit doun fayre,
 With the barbe of the bitte bi the bare nek.
 Thagh he homered heterly, hurt hym no more,
 Bot snyrt hym on that on syde, that severed the
 hyde.

The scharp schrank to the flesche through the
 schyre grece,
 That the schene blod over his schulderes shot
 to the erthe.
 And quen the burne sey the blode blenk on the
 snawe,
 He sprit forth spenne-fote more then a spere
 lenthe,
 Hent heterly his helme and on his hed cast,
 Schot with his schulderes his fayre schelde under,
 Braydes out a bryght sworde, and bremely he
 spekes--

.
 "Blynne, burne, of thy bur, bede me no mo!
 I haf a stroke in this sted withoute stryf hent,
 And if thow reches me any mo, I redyly schal quyte
 And yelde yederly ayayn--and therto ye tryst--
 and foo. (2309-25)

However, this scene could by no means be the crisis, since everything in terms of Gawain's problem has already been decided at this point (although Gawain himself is still in the dark).

At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that the release of powerful emotions was, for Aristotle, the aim of tragedy. Aristotle himself uses the term *katharsis* in this connection. The meaning of this word has been much discussed and debated through several centuries, yet Halliwell points out that "we do not really know what Ar[istotle] meant in this context by *katharsis*," and refers to it as "an idea of which Ar[istotle] gives no direct elucidation at all in the work itself" (Commentary 89-90). According to Halliwell's own "very tentative" interpretation, *katharsis* is

a powerful emotional experience which not only gives our natural feelings of pity and fear full play, but does so in a way which conduces to their rightful functioning as part of our understanding of, and response to, events in the human world. (Commentary 90)

Tarkovsky declares similarly that "the aim of art . . . is to plow and harrow [a person's] soul, rendering it capable of turning to good" (43). And playwright David Mamet, describing the same experience, says that "it purifies and cleanses through enabling the auditor to respond on other than a conscious level" (VerMeulen 16).

All three of the above explanations have in common the idea of an unusually forceful release of emotions in response to an artistic portrayal of some sort. In this thesis I would like to designate this powerful emotional experience simply with the word "release". But I would also like to expand its application beyond pity and fear to include the release of the emotions and responses elicited by comedy, e.g. mirth, happiness, laughter, relief, satisfaction, and so forth. For the purposes of this study, release will be taken to be the aim of the dramatic plot-structure.

Finally, "non-human" is a word I will use often to describe a variety of causes that lie beyond the human, the ordinary, or the "natural", such as chance, Fate, the gods, the will of God, and so on. For the sake of convenience I sometimes use the word "supernatural" in the same sense. Although it might be argued that chance is in fact quite natural, it could also be

argued that chance is simply a word for that causation which lies outside our understanding of the laws of nature.

Lucidity

With the terms now defined, a discussion of the merits of the causal plot-structure as conceived by Aristotle can now be undertaken. As previously remarked, Aristotle distinguishes between episodic and causal plot-structures: "Of simple plot-structures and actions the worst are episodic. I call an 'episodic' plot-structure one in which the episodes follow in a succession which is neither probable nor necessary" (41; ch. 9).

For example, the first two parts of the *Knight's Tale* are, strictly speaking, episodic. The succession of events--Arcite's release, Palamon's escape, their meeting in the woods, and Theseus's arrival--are neither probable nor necessary results of previous acts. They do not cause or result from one another. A causal plot-structure is superior to such an episodic sequence by virtue of two great strengths: lucidity and irony. I shall examine lucidity first.

Aristotle argues that events "should arise from the intrinsic structure of the plot, so that what results follows by either necessity or probability from the preceding events . . ." (42; ch. 10). Such a structure will command more "emotional power," he says (38; ch. 6). The words "necessity" and "probability"

here imply that the audience be able to follow and understand how events have caused each other. The cause-and-effect sequence is *lucid*:

A sense of wonder [e.g. pity and terror] will be more likely to be aroused in this way than as a result of the arbitrary or fortuitous, since even chance events make the greatest impact of wonder when they appear to have a purpose. (42; ch. 9)

In other words, powerful emotions are released when events happen which are surprising and yet, in the same moment, seem inevitable due to previous causes the audience has "witnessed" in the story. For Aristotle, the audience can only "witness" events which have been humanly caused. Thus, lucidity, for Aristotle, presupposes exclusively human causation. In this thesis, lucidity means the quality that a plot-structure possesses when its events have human causes and when the causal connections between these events are apparent. Of course for readers and writers of certain cultures and periods, the supernatural and the divine were not regarded as unintelligible or obscure causes, but perfectly rational and understandable ones. My use of the word "intelligibility" is not meant to dismiss or ignore this way of thinking, but merely to characterise the plot-structure of human causes with a word that does justice to Aristotle's own view and would not have been alien to him.

A particularly clear illustration of how the idea of lucidity works can be found in the following comic episode from Mel Brooks's recent film *Life Stinks* (for,

in fact, Aristotle's principle applies as well to comedy as to tragedy).⁵ Although very brief, the episode does actually contain a unified action. It has its own situation, active problem, beginning, middle, end, and transformation.

The scene opens with the protagonist, played by Mel Brooks, approaching a raised, freight loading-dock at the back of a restaurant. He is homeless, exhausted, and discouraged after a long, humiliating day. It is very late and, despite a long search, he has been unable to find a place to sleep. He wearily climbs the steps up to the dock. It is about five feet above ground level, four or five yards long, and just wide enough to sleep on.

However, as the exhausted man reaches the top of the steps, he notices there are already two other homeless people sleeping on the dock. The only place left in which to sleep is a small space in front of a door. He looks at the sleepers, then at the door, then at the drop. He hesitates but decides to lie down in front of it after all. He tries to make himself comfortable, lays his head on his arm and shuts his eyes. In front of him is the five foot drop to the ground, behind him the door.

Suddenly a man bursts out of the door. The protagonist is thrown, not to the pavement below, but

⁵ See, for example, Heinrich von Kleist's *Der zerbrochne Krug* [The Shattered Jug], a play with the same essential plot-structure as that of *Oedipus the King*--a judge uncovering his own misdeed--but which is, by contrast, a very funny comedy.

into a rubbish skip to the left of the door. The man in the doorway, a beefy worker in the restaurant completely unaware of the presence of the protagonist, walks to the skip, dumps a bucket of slop into it, and goes back inside, slamming the door.

The members of the audience laugh at this episode because what happens is a surprise, while at the same time the natural result of previous conditions and events *which they have been able to see*. Because these events and the connections between them are intelligible in terms of human causality, the climax appears inevitable or necessary. This is what is meant by lucidity.

The surprise or sense of "wonder" comes because the protagonist does not drop to the pavement but flies into the skip. One expects him to be knocked off the dock onto the pavement because of the "build-up": his hesitation, his doubtful glances at the door and the drop. But this surprise alone would not make for such a funny scene. As Aristotle observed, powerful emotional effects "can best be achieved when things occur contrary to expectation yet still on account of one another" (42; ch. 9). Having shown how the surprise is achieved, I shall briefly reconstruct the scene to trace how the events occurred "on account of one another" and thus became a lucid sequence.

First of all, Brooks the film-maker has effectively excluded everything arbitrary and fortuitous from the scene. Everything happens

explicably and naturally. The protagonist lies down in front of the door for a purpose. As the audience knows from events they have seen previously in the film, he is exhausted, and the place in front of the door is the only place left. The two other sleepers function both to reassure the protagonist that this loading-dock is a good place to sleep and at the same time to limit his choice to the space in front of the door. It is perfectly likely that a restaurant worker would come out of the back door late at night: he is cleaning up. The great force he uses to open the door and which sends the protagonist flying into the skip is plausible because the audience can immediately perceive the worker's massive build and angry demeanour. The skip also is clearly visible sitting to the left of the door and has been so from the start of the scene. The door (naturally) opens outward. All these conditions combine to make the protagonist's flight into the skip seem plausible and inevitable.

However, this sense of plausibility, and hence the humour which, in this case, is the release would not be present if all the events and conditions were not lucid. By this I mean, to reiterate, visible and understandable in human terms. For instance, the scene would not be very funny had the skip not been visible from the beginning but only appeared when the protagonist flew into it. This is because the audience would not understand where the skip had come from nor see any reason for its appearance apart from the joke.

Likewise, the climax would not be so funny if the restaurant employee were not seen to open the door for an understandable reason. The result would be the same: the protagonist would still wind up in the bin; but the causal connection would be lacking. Because the restaurant employee has a visible, plausible, understandable reason for going outside--dumping the garbage--the action "makes sense", and the audience laughs.

Incidentally, the episode's humour is greatly increased by virtue of the fact that the same, single event--the opening of the door--causes both of the protagonist's misfortunes. Not only does he wind up in the skip, he has garbage dumped on top of him. Thus, the audience sees a lucid and plausible pattern emerging which connects previous and present events.⁶

The obvious objection to this scene is that it is simply outlandish; it is *too* patterned, *too* coherent; it is far more lucid than events in real life ever are. In real life, for instance, the protagonist would be just as likely, if not more likely, to land in front of or behind the skip as inside it. However, the purpose of a story, in Aristotle's view, is not to *record* life, "not to speak of things which have occurred", for this is history, but to present a *mimesis*--a representation of "the kinds of events that *could* occur" (40). As Halliwell points out, Aristotle does not believe that

⁶ For a discussion of the effects of "pattern" on the emotions, see Halliwell, Commentary 117-18.

real life itself can often produce unified actions capable of release:

So in contemplating poetry (or other works of mimetic art) we draw on our real experience of the world, but we do so in order to understand events which possess a special degree of coherence and, therefore, significance. (Commentary 107)⁷

In other words, this episode *is* more coherent than real life. And it must be so if the audience is to grasp the "special significance" inherent in the action, which is, in this case, that life stinks.

This "special degree of coherence" becomes even more effective when the depicted events appear to be chaotic. For example, the killing of the helmsman in *Heart of Darkness*, is a scene depicting the most intense physical action:

Something big appeared in the air before the shutter, the rifle went overboard, and the man stepped back swiftly, looked at me over his shoulder in an extraordinary, profound, familiar manner, and fell upon my feet. The side of his head hit the wheel twice, and the end of what appeared to be a long cane clattered round and knocked over a little campstool. It looked as though after wrenching that thing from somebody ashore he had lost his balance in the effort. (81; pt. 2)

What has actually happened, of course, is that the helmsman has been speared. This scene is the climax of the story in the sense I have given--the point of highest *emotional* response from the reader. As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Conrad's intensely accurate rendering of detail provides much of the

⁷ For a related line of argument, but in a different context, see Hardy 32-3.

emotional impact, since it allows readers to imagine they are actually seeing the action as it happens. But this sense of verisimilitude would quickly evaporate if the helmsman's death were not also the natural result of the lucidity of the events and circumstances within the story.

How, then, does the helmsman come to be killed? From what does his death result? Here is what happens immediately before the helmsman gets hit:

I caught sight of a V-shaped ripple on the water ahead. . . . Another snag! A fusillade burst out under my feet. The pilgrims had opened up with their Winchesters, and were simply squirting lead into that bush. A deuce of a lot of smoke came up and drove slowly forward. . . . Now I couldn't see the ripple or the snag either. I stood in the doorway, peering, and the arrows came in swarms. . . . The bush began to howl. . . . the report of a rifle just at my back deafened me. I glanced over my shoulder, and the pilot-house was yet full of noise and smoke when I made a dash at the wheel. The fool-nigger had dropped everything, to throw the shutter open and let off that Martini-Henry. He stood before the wide opening, glaring . . . while I straightened the sudden twist out of that steamboat. There was no room to turn even if I had wanted to, the snag was somewhere very near ahead in that confounded smoke, there was no time to lose, so I just crowded her into the bank--right into the bank, where I knew the water was deep. (80-1; pt. 2)

In this passage the events happen at such a furious pace that they seem like chaos, having no connection other than their proximity in time and space. But if the events are gone over slowly in reverse, a strong cause-and-effect chain ending in the helmsman's death becomes plain.

The helmsman gets hit with the spear for two reasons: 1) he is standing unprotected in the cabin

door and 2) Marlow has "crowded her [the boat] into the bank". The helmsman went to the doorway in order to shoot at the attackers with his rifle. Because he abandoned the wheel, Marlow had to straighten the boat's course. He decided to steer into the shore because he could no longer see where the snag was in the river. He could no longer spot the snag because of the smoke from the pilgrims' rifles. The snag and the narrowness of the channel came, in turn, as consequences of Marlow's original decision to take the western passage when the river divided at a sandbank.

When the events are gone over in reverse like this, the causal structure of the scene becomes apparent, and one can, perhaps, make out Conrad's hand steering the events towards his intended climax. Nevertheless, it is this structure that creates release. When the events are read in order, they build to a kind of crescendo of peril, each hazard bringing on a worse danger, so that the scene simulates the commotion and confusion, the sensory overload, of an actual attack. Thus, although very rigidly plotted, the helmsman's death comes as a shock, happening "contrary to expectation yet still on account of [previous events]" (42; ch. 9). Paradoxically, it is the cause-and-effect structure--the most overtly devised plot of all--that gives the greatest illusion of reality.

Irony

I have attempted to show above how human causes make for lucidity, which in turn generates release. The other great strength of Aristotle's causal plot-structure--irony--also generates release but in a more profound way. Primarily, this is the irony that comes, in both comedy and tragedy, from characters bringing misfortunes on themselves. For example, much of the pity and sadness at the death of the helmsman comes from the knowledge that it was, ironically, his own decision to stand in the open doorway and fire the rifle. His death would be less moving if he had been ordered to stand there or if he had been hit simply by chance. Aristotle terms a character's share in his own transformation *hamartia*, which Halliwell translates as fallibility.⁸ It moves the spectator to fear and pity in the tragedy and to laughter in the comedy.

Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* provides a fine illustration of this type of irony as it results from the cause-effect sequence. Indeed, it is a near-perfect example of all the strengths of the Aristotelian-style plot-structure discussed thus far. I shall consider the plot-structure as whole, then, before looking specifically at the irony of fallibility.

The tale can be diagrammed as follows (Causal connections are indicated by italics. Numbers in

⁸ Aristotle 44; ch. 13. See also Halliwell, *Commentary* 138-40.

parentheses refer to a cause other than the one immediately preceding.):

1. The miller routinely steals grain from his customers. One of them--the manciple at Cambridge--is ill, so
2. Two students, John and Aleyn go to the mill, determined not to let the miller steal from them, so
3. John stands at the hopper and Aleyn at the trough while the miller grinds their corn, so
4. In order to cheat them all the same, the miller unties their horse, so
5. It runs into a nearby field chasing mares, so
6. John and Aleyn have to go chase it, so
7. The miller can and does steal half a bushel of their flour and has his wife bake a cake with it.
8. John and Aleyn cannot catch the horse until very late (5), so
9. They ask the miller to put them up, so
10. He agrees and has his daughter buy food and ale, so
11. Everybody has a lot to drink, so
12. When they go to sleep, the miller's family snore a lot, so
13. John and Aleyn cannot sleep (everyone has to sleep in the same room because the house is small), so
14. Aleyn decides to sleep with the miller's daughter and gets into her bed, so
15. John fears he will be laughed at for sleeping alone when the story gets told back at Cambridge, so
16. He moves the baby's cradle to the foot of his bed.
17. The wife goes to the toilet (11).

18. When she comes back, she feels for the cradle in the dark and, finding it at the foot of John's bed, mistakenly gets into bed with him (16 also 11), so
19. John "swyves" her (15).
20. When morning comes Aleyn decides to go back to his bed, (so as not to be caught by the miller), and the daughter, having fallen in love with him, tells him about the cake, but
21. Missing the cradle, he mistakenly gets into bed with the miller (16), so
22. Believing the miller to be John, Aleyn recounts to him how he slept with his daughter all night, so
23. They have a fist fight, so
24. The wife, still unaware of her mistake (18), believes it is the two students who are fighting and mistakenly knocks her husband unconscious with a staff, so
25. John and Aleyn escape, taking the cake with them.

The *Reeve's Tale* has a "complex" plot in Aristotle's terms because it contains both a reversal and a recognition. The reversal occurs in events 4, 8, and 9. By losing their horse John and Aleyn seem to have been bested by the miller. Being dependent on his good graces for food and lodging is humiliating to them, but it is precisely this circumstance that creates the opportunity for them to sleep with his wife and daughter and so to humiliate him.

The recognition occurs, of course, in event 23 when Aleyn inadvertently discovers himself to the

millar. Indeed, this is the superior kind of recognition commended by Aristotle:

The best of all recognitions is the type which arises from the events themselves, where the emotional impact comes about through a probable sequence of action. . . . Such instances alone avoid contrived tokens. (49-50; ch. 16)

(By "contrived tokens" Aristotle means external devices for recognition such as scars.) However, Aristotle also finds the recognition that occurs in direct conjunction with the reversal to be the most effective, and this is not the case in the *Reeve's Tale*. The reversal occurs at events 4, 5, and 6, and the recognition much later at event 23. Nevertheless, Aleyn's revelation of his identity is similar to a reversal in that it threatens a disastrous swing in the students' fortunes as the vicious miller strikes back:

And by the throte-bolle he caughte Alayn,
And he hente hym despitously agayn,
And on the nose he smoot hym with his
fest.
Doun ran the bloody streem upon his brest;
And in the floor, with nose and mouth to-
broke,
They walwe as doon two pigges in a poke. (4273-7)

Complete disaster is only avoided by the timely intervention of the miller's wife with staff (event 24).

The recognition does quite deftly conform to Aristotle's requirement that it result from "the events themselves". It is likely that Aleyn would want to return to his own bed before dawn, and, finding the cradle at the end of his bed, he has reason to get in

bed with the miller. He then quite naturally boasts about his adventures with the daughter to the man he takes to be John and so reveals himself.

Here again, as in *Life Stinks*, every single event results from a previous one or from the very plausible circumstances of the story. Thus, everything seems to happen naturally. Even events which would normally seem improbable, like event 20, are explained by reference to previous events and conditions in the cause-effect chain: it is dark, the crib is in the wrong place, and the wife has been drinking. Again there is nothing arbitrary or fortuitous; every event has a lucid, human cause. Nevertheless, the overall situation is almost farcical. As with the episode from *Life Stinks*, this artificially coherent pattern actually *increases* the (comic) effect.

The effect is greatly intensified through the use of irony. The two students are only able to end up "swyving" the Miller's wife and daughter because the Miller cheated them. Likewise, by moving the cradle, John gets to sleep with the miller's wife, but also brings about the situation through which he and Aleyn are discovered. Finally, it is Aleyn himself who tells the miller about his frolics with the daughter.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of this kind of irony in a story, I have imagined an alternative plot as follows. Events transpire in the original down to event 4. Then the miller manages to cheat the two students out of their wheat, not by untying their

horse, but by getting them drunk. Thus, the hour does not grow so late, and they do not need to stay overnight in the miller's house. They simply set off dejectedly for home. However, they suddenly decide, for no particular reason, that they would like to sleep with the miller's daughter. They return in the middle of the night. She lets them in through the bedroom window and events continue as in the original. Needless to say, this version is flat and clumsy compared to the original. Why?

For one thing there is no "inevitability". John and Aleyn might just as well have ridden on home and "swyved" someone else. My plot-structure is sequence, not *consequence*.

Much more importantly, my revised plot-structure lacks irony. Chaucer's version is infinitely funnier simply because readers see the Miller bringing his misfortune on himself. He is the one who drove off the students' horse in the first place. It is his own fault. Likewise the story would be less funny if Aleyn had climbed into bed with the Miller because he got confused in the dark rather than as a result of John's trick, or if the miller had discovered Aleyn some other way, by feeling his beard, for example. It is because Aleyn reveals *himself* and tells the miller of his own free will (and in detail) what he has done that the recognition is so funny.

"The Happy Man's Shirt" provides a counter-example, by being a story in which the protagonist does

not exhibit fallibility but in which the transformation occurs totally by chance. As with the other stories examined above, it has an essentially causal, Aristotelian-style structure as outlined below:

1. The prince was unhappy, *so*
2. The king tried everything to make him happy, *so*
3. The prince was still unhappy, *so*
4. The king asked his wise men what to do, *so*
5. They said the prince should exchange shirts with a happy man, *so*
6. The king tried to find a happy man, *but*
7. He could not, *so*
8. At his wit's end, he went hunting.
9. He chanced upon a truly happy man, *so*
10. He tried to get his shirt, *but*
11. The happy man had no shirt.

Here each event, with the exception of numbers nine and eleven, is the natural result of an event that precedes it. However, at event 8 the causal link is missing. The king's failure to find a happy man does not make it necessary for him to *hunt*; he might have taken a bath instead. Still it is as a result of repeated failure that he gives up looking for the happy man and does something else.

Event 8 is in fact the plot's most important event so far, its turning point, its crisis. It marks the place where the king's fortunes can begin to change. However, it is not only a crisis, marking the beginning

of the transformation, but is also something like a reversal. The king quits looking for the happy man and goes off hunting. He does not expect to find what he has been searching for; in fact he has given up searching. This would seem likely to do nothing to solve the active problem. Yet it is the very event that brings him to his goal--the happy man.

Nevertheless, this reversal differs from a strict Aristotelian reversal in that it happens *by chance*, whereas Aristotle insists that a reversal "conform to probability or necessity" (42; ch.11). While it is perfectly plausible that the king, at his wit's end, would go hunting, it is neither necessary nor probable that he find a happy man while doing it. The king *chances* upon the happy man, and it is a very lucky chance. The problem, then, from the Aristotelian point of view, is that the story's most important event, the event that brings on the transformation, crisis, and reversal, seems to happen purely by chance and not as the *inevitable* result of previous action. After all, it is easy enough to pull any hero out of his predicament by having him just happen to run right into the solution.

Undoubtedly this plot-structure would have more power to release if event 9 seemed like an inevitable consequence and not just a lucky chance. It would possess the powerful irony created when the protagonist's fallibility is responsible for the transformation.

However, as previously noted, the unresolved active problem of "The Happy Man's Shirt" makes it an unusual kind of story. Indeed, the purpose of the story seems not to be creating an emotional effect but, rather, presenting a puzzle, a paradox, that provides some insight into its great subject: happiness. When we read it we do not feel any great release of fear or pity for the king or the prince. We do feel curiosity; we want to know how the problem was solved. Did changing shirts with the happy man work?

Regardless of how one may wish to interpret the significance of the ending, the tale does deliver some insight into the search for happiness. The king, for example, is unable to find a happy man no matter how hard he tries. But when he stops trying and just goes on with life as usual (hunting) he finds what he seeks. Consequently the plot-structure might be seen to underline a kind of common folk wisdom: happiness cannot be found by direct pursuit but comes while we are pursuing something else. (Note, for example, that the happy man himself is not pursuing happiness either, but is at his work in the vineyard.) It is perhaps for this reason that "The Happy Man's Shirt" does not contain a complete transformation. The fate of the protagonist is secondary to the questions it asks about the search for happiness.

By contrast, the type of plot Aristotle had in mind--Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, for example--aims above all else to evoke powerful emotions in the audience.

Our curiosity as to what will befall Agamemnon certainly does not matter at all after the prophetess, Cassandra, quite early in the play, reveals that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus will certainly kill him. We are not expecting the play so much to give us some wisdom about life (although it may well do so) as to make us *feel* something about it. This difference in aim seems to me to account generally for most of the structural differences between a story like "The Happy Man's Shirt" and the other plot-structures examined in this chapter.

Fallibility and Non-Human Causation

As Aristotle recognised, an arbitrary or fortuitous transformation is simply not as effective as the ironic, humanly caused transformations seen in stories like the *Reeve's Tale*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *Life Stinks*.

However, the merits of Aristotle's cause-effect structure are, at the same time, its great flaw. Strict observance of the rules described by Aristotle would appear to exclude chance and the divine, for example, as causes or explanations for the events in stories, yet these are some of the most important and

recurrent materials of stories from all ages including Aristotle's own. As Halliwell observes:

By equating unity of plot-structure with unity of action, Ar[istotle] presupposes that poetic drama can always afford to present an internally perspicuous and intelligible sequence of events.

Tragedy can pose a challenge for such an assumption by dealing with obscure events whose underlying causes may not be accessible to our ordinary powers of comprehension. (Commentary 111)

Aristotle's reluctance to allow the non-human as a cause in plot-structure stems above all from his concern that the plot itself be capable of release.⁹ However, this capability depends more on fallibility than on a sequence of human causes. The plot-structure need not exclude every non-human cause so long as the plot remains lucid enough for the audience to recognise that the protagonist is playing a key role in bringing about his own transformation. A comparison of the plot-structures of the *Knight's Tale* and *Oedipus the King* provides a useful illustration of this assertion.

The *Knight's Tale* has a plot-structure which relies heavily on the non-human as cause and explanation of events. It seeks to show both the inexplicable and the explicable as having their ultimate causes beyond the human. Consequently, it makes a good place to begin an examination of the use of non-human causes in plot.¹⁰

The following is a diagram of the structure of the *Knight's Tale* :

⁹ See Halliwell, Commentary 111-12.

¹⁰ See Frakes 1-2 regarding the non-human in the *Knight's Tale*.

1. Palamon and Arcite see Emelye and fall in love.¹¹

Disturbance

2. Theseus releases Arcite but bans him from Athens.

3. Arcite returns in disguise and serves Emelye.

Complication

4. Palamon escapes from prison.

5. The two rivals meet and fight in the woods.

6. Theseus interrupts, sets up the tournament with Emelye as the prize.

7. So Arcite, Palamon, and Emelye supplicate the Gods and receive promises.

Crisis

8. So Arcite defeats Palamon in the tournament.

9. Then Arcite dies.

Denouement

10. So Theseus gives Emelye to Palamon in marriage.

The diagram reveals that it is only the events of the complication which happen purely by chance with no further explanation. Of these, seeing Emelye (event 1), Palamon's escape from prison (event 4), the rivals' meeting in the woods (event 5), and Theseus' arrival during the duel (event 6) happen with no causal link to prior events. Arcite's release from prison (event 2)

¹¹ Events before this are not part of the action of Palamon and Arcite and function primarily to give their story a context. Aristotle defines a "beginning" as "that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event, but which can itself give rise naturally to some further fact or occurrence" (39; ch 7).

is the result of Perotheus's intervention, but Perotheus's arrival on the scene also happens by chance: "It happed on a day" (1189). Only Arcite's return in disguise (event 3) has a causal connection to a previous event, but this connection, in turn, is non-human--the intervention of a god. In any case, Arcite's return has no subsequent effect on the rest of the plot.

By contrast, all the events of the denouement, including the crisis (event 7), form a causal chain. Arcite, Palamon, and Emelye go to the temples and make their sacrifices because Theseus has caused three temples to be built as part of his attempts to regulate the conflict. Because these prayers are accepted, Arcite prevails in the contest (event 8) but also falls from his horse (event 9). And Arcite's death opens the way for Theseus to give Emelye to Palamon (10). Events of the denouement are therefore made lucid to the reader but occur in a realm beyond that of the human. Thus, the ultimate causes are called by names such as "aventure" and "destinee" by the characters. Likewise, Theseus's decision to give Emelye to Palamon is given a rationally understandable explanation in human terms--politics--but is "actually" the result of the compromise forged by Saturn (2443-6).

Furthermore, the denouement is in fact carefully plotted by cause-and-effect. It also contains, if not a strict Aristotelian reversal, something very similar to it in events 9 and 10. Arcite fully expects to win

Emelye by defeating Palamon. But, instead, the victory gives rise to his death. Thus, though he seems to be moving from woe to weal by winning the contest, he is actually moving in the opposite direction towards his death. Strictly speaking, it is not Arcite's fall which is the ultimate cause of his death. The real roots of the reversal are in the prayer episode. Arcite prays for victory in the contest not for Emelye. When his prayer is accepted, he is certain this also means Emelye will be his, but, of course, the opposite takes place, partly because he asked for victory rather than specifically for Emelye. Of course the reader is not completely surprised, since he or she already knows about the prayers, the gods' conflicting promises, and that Saturn has come up with some solution that "hath pleased every part" (2446).

The complication, then, is "episodically" organised with all the major events occurring by chance, while from the beginning of the denouement on to the end, the plot is structured very much like classical Greek tragedy. Naturally, this plot-structure reflects the dual nature of the tale, a medieval romance based on a classical story. The prevalence of chance and "aventure" as well as the "episodic" plot-structure are, of course, typical of medieval romance. The events of the complication in the *Knight's Tale* would seem right at home in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, for example. On the other hand, the

plot's similarities to Greek tragedy have already been noted.

Chaucer's dualistic treatment of causation here may seem contradictory, as if the structure of events were a house divided against itself. But as John Bayley suggests, this kind of division is not necessarily a fault in itself: "What matters is the extent to which disunity and division may themselves become aspects--indispensable and irremovable ones--of the artistic whole" (12).¹² The abruptness and completeness of the shift from the episodic to the causal, along with the fact that it occurs precisely at the crisis, at the very turning point of the action, indicates that the dual structure in the *Knight's Tale* is a deliberate device. Its purpose is to further the exploration of the story's themes.

As I argued in Chapter I, the story is an examination of the words "chance", "fortune", and "destiny". These themes are overtly discussed in the long and famous speeches about fortune and destiny by Arcite, Palamon, and to a lesser extent Theseus.¹³ Further, the story-teller himself actually plays up the fortuitousness of the events. Palamon first spies Emelye "by aventure or cas" (1074). "It happed on a day" that Perotheus visits Theseus and secures Arcite's

¹² See Ryding's discussion of the typical "bipartite" structure of medieval narrative. See esp. 115-61.

¹³ Arcite (1251-72), Palamon (1303-80), Theseus (2987-3015).

release (1189). Palamon's escape is "by aventure or destyne-- / As, whan a thyng is shapen, it shal be" (1465-6). Palamon and Arcite meet "as by aventure" (1516). And Theseus is drawn to the wood by "The destinee, ministre general" (1663). Finally, as I noted earlier, Palamon and Arcite are shown to be so nearly equal in merit that chance seems to be the only fair way of deciding which one will be victorious, that is, the only answer to the active question.

To take another example, it is preposterous that Palamon, Arcite, Emelye, and Theseus would all end up in the same wood on the same morning. However, by relating an event so utterly unlikely, the story-teller attempts to show just how powerful and inescapable destiny is. The more unlikely it is that the four meet, the more powerful destiny proves itself to be by bringing them together:

The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over al
The purveiaunce that God hath seyn
 biforn,
So strong it is that, though the world had
 sworn
The contrarie of a thyng by ye or nay,
Yet somtyme it shal fallen on a day
That falleth nat eft withinne a thousand
 year. (1663-9)

In this same connection, Kundera makes the following relevant observation:

Is not an event in fact more significant and noteworthy the greater the number of fortuities necessary to bring it about?

Chance and chance alone has a message for us. Everything that occurs out of necessity, everything expected, repeated day in and day out, is mute. Only chance can speak to us. We read its message much as gypsies read the images made by coffee grounds at the bottom of a cup. (*Being* 48-9)

To borrow Kundera's metaphor, then, the structure of the *Knight's Tale* can be seen as presenting, in the complication, first the patterns in the coffee mug without any "reading", and then, after the prayer sequence, the patterns along with their interpretation. With no "reading" of the meaning of the events in the first half, all the coincidences and chance meetings seem arbitrary, forced, and contrived. Consequently the action begins to seem random, arbitrary, and futile. However, after the prayer sequence, when we are allowed to see destiny at work, we find that the "chance" events were really significant after all.

For the reasons I stated in my introduction, this significance cannot be iterated outside the story but must remain in the form of the question posed by the action itself. Nevertheless, it is safe to say the story structure implies that the apparently arbitrary nature of Palamon's defeat and Arcite's death are in fact due to causes that are understandable enough in human terms (the gods seem just as temperamental as mortals) could we only perceive them. Events such as Arcite's fall seem accidental only when our perception is confined to the human sphere. *The Knight's Tale*

uses the non-human as causes because the story itself is an exploration of the supernatural as the resolution of a human problem.

Even leaving aside the question of the medieval world view, the story's plot-structure cannot be faulted for reflecting the story's theme. However, the objection, from an Aristotelian point of view, is not that the *Knight's Tale* examines what is supernatural, but that the sequence of events itself is not scrutable, not comprehensible enough to lend the plot-structure itself the power to release.

As McGilchrist observes, Chaucer portrays Fortune as "blind with respect to persons, not designing a particular course for an individual, but turning her wheel, ensuring that life is inherently unstable" (50). Arcite and Palamon are shown not to be in control of their acts (in the sense of "act" earlier established). Rather, they are driven along by a blind and inexplicable passion for Emelye and by superhuman forces, either by "destinee the ministre general", or by the gods (1663).

Consequently, the *transformation* of their fortunes inevitably appears arbitrary or predetermined rather than as a natural consequence of their own acts, of their fallibility. This exclusion of the character's fallibility in his own fate is what makes the plot-structure of the *Knight's Tale* inferior on Aristotle's terms.

The spectators must be able to see in the transformation the consequences of acts, not coincidence, in order to experience release. Dürrenmatt, after establishing that the object of tragedy is to grip us, asserts that "only something that matters to us, with which we are capable of identifying in some way, can grip us" (2: 129; my translation). And Lessing explains that the fear and pity of which Aristotle was speaking "is the fear that we might become the pitied object ourselves" (76; my translation).¹⁴ This fear is likely to be less powerful if, as in the *Knight's Tale*, the transformation to unhappiness appears to have happened rather arbitrarily, indeed by chance.

In fairness to Chaucer, it should be noted that the *Knight's Tale* was, of course, not intended as a classical tragedy. Its total form--which is not apparent in the mere sequence of events above--is much more descriptive, more discursive, more rhetorical than a classical drama. As Robert M. Jordan has suggested:

It is not that Chaucer is uninterested or unskilled in persuasive and "dramatic" representation--far from it--but that he incorporates the illusion of reality into the larger dimensions of a conscious literary artistry. (169 emphasis added)

Furthermore, I have somewhat overstated the lack of fallibility in the *Knight's Tale* in order to make my point clearer. Arcite's transformation does, after

¹⁴ See Halliwell's discussion of this point in *Aristotle's* 183.

all, come through a *conjunction* of the gods' will and his own error. He does make a mistake by praying for victory rather than for Emelye. And, as in Creon's case in Sophocles's *Antigone*, the disaster is out of all proportion to the size of the mistake. Thus, the denouement does partake, to a degree, of the irony mentioned earlier, and this gives it at least a whiff of classical-style tragedy. Nevertheless, the plot-structure of the *Knight's Tale* alone does not achieve the emotional force of an action such as that in *Oedipus the King*.

Oedipus the King, like the *Knight's Tale*, explores themes such as fate and the will of the gods in human affairs. In both stories things happen on an ultimate level because of fate or destiny or the will of the gods. The great difference between them is that for every supernatural cause Sophocles also provides a non-religious, *human* cause for each event. Things do not happen purely by chance or destiny, without reference to the human. Each event is the result of some previous, humanly caused event carefully plotted in the story.

The difference between the two stories can be diagrammed as follows:

Complication of the
Knight's Tale

Destiny/The Gods

Events

Oedipus the King

Fate/The Gods

Rational Causes

Events

The plot-structure in the complication of the *Knight's Tale* allows no room for human cause and effect; the events are simply direct results of destiny. In *Oedipus the King* they have an ultimate supernatural cause but are *plotted* as a sequence of human causes and effects in the story. To view the difference another way, the supernatural in *Oedipus the King* explains why Oedipus's fate befalls him. The lucid, human causality of the plot explains *how* it happened. It is the "how" that is relatively missing from the complication of the *Knight's Tale*.

Consequently, although *Oedipus the King* contains events as astonishing, if not more so, than events in the *Knight's Tale*, they happen as plausible results of previous events dramatised or related in the play. Hence, we find them understandable and inevitable. Indeed, a good part of the effect of *Oedipus the King* comes from the way in which these astounding events are shown to follow naturally and understandably from previous actions in the play, i.e. from its lucidity. And, of course, on the human level it is Oedipus himself who brings about his own misfortunes. He is, thus, far more pitiable than Arcite, even though Arcite is killed and Oedipus only blinded.

To summarise the discussion so far, then, the plot of *Oedipus the King*, and indeed the denouement of the *Knight's Tale*, indicate that the supernatural can function in plot-structures of essentially human cause

and effect. However, if the greatest emotional effects are to be achieved, the transformation itself must not occur through non-human or inexplicable means but be seen to be brought on by the protagonist's own fallibility.

Naturally, the non-human can be effectively incorporated into the dramatic plot-structure in many ways, and there are many examples, not just those in *Oedipus the King*, from which to choose. I shall briefly discuss two such examples which incorporate the non-human in different ways. They will serve to hint at how variously the non-human cause may function in dramatic plot-structures. And they will offer support to my argument that the plot-structure's ability to release depends primarily on the connection between fallibility and transformation.

Chance as the Impetus for Action

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the supernatural, specifically chance, functions as the impetus for the acts of Tereza--one of the two main characters--which form the disturbance.¹⁵ In contrast to the characters in the *Knight's Tale*, Tereza is aware that she is involved in fortuitous circumstances but chooses to interpret and act on them in her own way. She is thus responsible to a large degree (though not entirely) for the chain of events leading to her

¹⁵ For a short but trenchant discussion of a chance as first cause in unified action, see Butcher 181-2.

transformation. Consequently, at least in her case, the plot-structure possesses an irony capable of generating release.

The circumstances surrounding the first meeting of Tomas and Tereza, the novel's main characters, are as follows. Tomas, a doctor from Prague, has gone on business to a small, provincial town. He happens to make acquaintance with Tereza, a waitress in the small restaurant at his hotel. They meet once briefly after her shift and he gives her his address in Prague. The reader learns the sequence of events that led to this first encounter when Tomas goes over it in his mind seven years later (during which time they have married):

A complex neurological case *happened* to have been discovered at the hospital in Tereza's town. They called in the chief surgeon of Tomas's hospital in Prague for consultation, but the chief surgeon . . . *happened* to be suffering from sciatica, and because he could not move he sent Tomas. . . . The town had several hotels, but Tomas *happened* to be given a room in the one where Tereza was employed. He *happened* to have enough free time before his train left to stop at the hotel restaurant. Tereza *happened* to be on duty, and *happened* to be serving Tomas's table. It had taken six chance happenings to push Tomas towards Tereza, as if he had little inclination to go to her on his own. (*Being* 35)

The fact that it took so many chance events to bring about a relationship that now seems absolutely essential makes Tomas uneasy. This thought is thematically connected to an earlier unhappy memory of how Tereza once remarked that had she not met him, she

would certainly have fallen in love with a certain friend of his:

He realized it was only a matter of chance that Tereza loved him and not his friend Z. . . .

We all reject out of hand the idea that the love of our life may be something light or weightless; we presume our love is what must be. (*Being* 34-5)

Later in the novel, the story-teller considers the coincidences of the first meeting from Tereza's point of view as follows. A stranger (Tomas) sat at a table reading a book. He smiled at her and asked for a cognac. As she went behind the bar to get it, she noticed Beethoven was playing on the radio. For Tereza, as illustrated in episodes from her past, both Beethoven and books are images of "the world on the other side", an exciting world of heart and mind for which she longs. So,

rounding the corner with Tomas's cognac, she tried to read chance's message: How was it possible that at the very moment she was taking an order of cognac to a stranger she found attractive, at that very moment she heard Beethoven? (*Being* 49)

After Tomas finished the drink he asked to have the drink charged to his room:

He showed her his key, which was attached to a piece of wood with a red six drawn on it.

"That's odd," she said. "Six."

"What's so odd about that?" he asked.

She had suddenly recalled that the house where they had lived in Prague before her parents were divorced was number six. But she answered something else (which we may credit to her wiles): "You're in room six and my shift ends at six." (*Being* 50)

And after her shift Tereza finds Tomas waiting for her, sitting on a yellow park bench, "The very same bench she had sat on the day before with a book in her lap! She knew then . . . that this stranger was her fate" (*Being* 50).

The story-teller, then, explains that it was this string of coincidences--the book, Beethoven, the number six, and the yellow park bench--more than Tomas's invitation to visit him in Prague that gave her the courage to actually go to the city and look him up--which, in the order of the telling, is the story's first event as well as the disturbance. Because Tereza noticed these coincidences and acted upon them, the love story of Tereza and Tomas begins. It is worth noting again how different Tereza is from Palamon and Arcite, who are portrayed for the most part as unwitting pawns in a game played by Fortune and the gods.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, then, a cluster of fortuities becomes the first cause of the plot. The fortuities themselves are no more rationally comprehensible, indeed less so, than chance is in the *Knight's Tale*, but they are made part of a lucid, human chain of action: the motivations for Tereza's acts. They give her the courage to go to Tomas.

This pattern is repeated later in the story at the crisis. Tereza responds to another chance event--the

Russian invasion of her country--again by acting.¹⁶ She takes the invasion as an opportunity to break off the painful relationship with Tomas by leaving Czechoslovakia. And it is this event, in turn, which marks the beginning of the transformation.

Kundera justifies this use of coincidence in the novel by observing that in real life people organise their lives in response to chance in the same way. He grants that such organization

may seem quite "novelistic" to you, and I am willing to agree, but only on condition that you refrain from reading such notions as "fictive," "fabricated," and "untrue to life" into the word "novelistic." Because human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion. . . .

. . . Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress. (*Being* 52)

Novels, indeed stories in general, cannot but deal with the supernatural, chance, coincidence, fate, destiny, and so forth, since these are not only conditions of life, but principles by which people order or "compose" life. However, the important point for this discussion is that in Kundera's novel, human characters--not coincidence, not the gods, not "aventure"--are seen to do the composing.

This ability to "compose" is what allows for fallibility, although, strictly speaking, "fallibility" is not the right word in Tereza's case, for she and Tomas move ultimately from adversity to prosperity.

¹⁶ The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia is a chance event in terms of the plot. That is, it is not the result of any previous cause appearing in the plot. Of course it is not a chance event in historical terms.

Nevertheless, one can speak of her degree of responsibility. It is enough for this comparison to establish that the structure of events in the *Unbearable Lightness of Being* is lucid and based after all on the acts of the characters, though these grow from the mysteries of chance and coincidence.

The Supernatural as Revelation

Like the *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" has a fundamentally lucid plot-structure. In fact, all of its events except the crisis are meticulously chained together by human cause and effect. However, by making a mysterious chance event the story's crisis, O'Connor abruptly reveals a profoundly religious dimension underneath the surface of the action. In striking contradiction to Aristotle's requirements, this non-humanly caused event actually increases the plot-structure's power to release.

The structure of the story's events can be diagrammed as follows:

1. The grandmother does not want to travel to Florida for vacation. She reads in the paper that the murderer, "The Misfit," has escaped from jail and is heading towards Florida. But the family travels to Florida anyway. The grandmother brings along her cat, so
3. They pass near an old plantation that the grandmother remembers from her youth, so
4. She convinces her son, Bailey, to turn around and take the family there, but
5. It is the wrong road; the grandmother realises she is mistaken, so

6. She becomes embarrassed and fidgets, *so*
7. She startles the cat, *so*
8. The cat jumps up on Bailey's shoulder, *so*.
9. He runs off the road, overturning the car.
10. The Misfit and his boys find them there.
11. The grandmother recognises them (1), *so*
12. The criminals murder her and the family.

Before I discuss the role of the non-human, I shall indicate how close the rest of the story is to the ideal Aristotelian plot-structure.

The diagram shows that the story contains a recognition, at event 11, and a reversal, or at least something like one, also at event 11. The recognition is the superior kind designated by Aristotle--it results from the events themselves. The grandmother recognises The Misfit from his picture in the paper.

Event 11 is also a reversal with the condition that the grandmother believes that by telling The Misfit that she recognises him she will save the family. If this is the case, then by performing an act she reckons will save the family, she actually dooms it. But without the grandmother's deliberate intention, the act lacks the irony necessary for a reversal in Aristotle's terms. It is characteristic of the grandmother that her acts have consequences quite opposite to her intentions but also that she acts impulsively. Thus, her intentions are not clear from the story:

"Look here now," Bailey began suddenly, "we're in a predicament! We're in . . ."

The grandmother shrieked. She scrambled to her feet and stood staring. "You're The Misfit!" she said. "I recognized you at once!" (21-2)

In either case, it is this event which suddenly decides the family's fate:

"Yes'm," the man said, smiling slightly as if he were pleased in spite of himself to be known, "but it would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me." (22)

The recognition scene and the reversal are thus in "direct conjugation", as Aristotle requires of the finest plots; they are the immediate causes of the final disaster.

Likewise, the plot has a meticulously crafted cause-effect structure. Even the almost slapstick *accident* follows neatly and naturally through a string of plausible causes:

"It's not much farther," the grandmother said and just as she said it, a horrible thought came to her. The thought was so embarrassing that she turned red in the face and her eyes dilated and her feet jumped up, upsetting her valise in the corner. The instant the valise moved, the newspaper top she had over the basket under it rose with a snarl and Pitty Sing, the cat, sprang onto Bailey's shoulder.

The children were thrown to the floor and their mother, clutching the baby, was thrown out the door onto the ground; the old lady was thrown into the front seat. The car turned over once and landed right-side-up in a gulch off the side of the road. (18-19)

In stark contrast to this nearly perfect dramatic structure, event 10 appears to happen for no reason at all. The Misfit just *happens* to find the grandmother. There is no reason or cause given for The Misfit to be

on the same road. His arrival is described without the slightest explanation or reference to previous events:

They saw a car some distance away on top of a hill, coming slowly as if the occupants were watching them. The grandmother stood up and waved both arms dramatically to attract their attention. The car continued to come on slowly, disappeared around a bend and appeared again, moving even slower, on top of the hill they had gone over. It was a big black battered hearse-like automobile. There were three men in it. (20)

The Misfit's arrival is conspicuous, then, for being the only event not part of the cause-and-effect chain. It inevitably leads the reader to question it, to wonder what it is doing in the story and why. Thus, it must bear a special degree of stress within the plot-structure.

It also shifts the tone of the story. Up until his arrival the tone is decidedly comic, if not farcical. For example, the grandmother's family seems indestructible. The car is a total wreck, yet Bailey's wife, the sole casualty, sustains only,

a cut down her face and a broken shoulder.

"We've had an ACCIDENT!" the children cried in a frenzy of delight.

"But nobody's killed," June Star said with disappointment as the grandmother limped out of the car, her hat still pinned to her head but the broken front brim standing up at a jaunty angle and the violet spray hanging off the side. (19)

After The Misfit's arrival this kind of comedy disappears and the story becomes a very grim tale indeed.

Event 10 is thus highly conspicuous for abruptly changing a funny story into a grave and violent one, for changing the stakes at one blow from the grandmother's loss or retention of her petty dignity to life or death, and for being the crisis, the turning point of the entire action. Why, then, is it the story's one and only chance event?

As I suggested above, there is a deeper, religious dimension to the story, and this dimension first breaks into the action at event 10--the arrival of The Misfit. Given O'Connor's well known religious pre-occupation this suggestion of a religious dimension to the story is not at all far-fetched. O'Connor herself wrote:

I see from the standpoint of Christian Orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ, and what I see in the world I see in relation to that.
(*Mystery* 32)

Even critic André Bleikasten, whose strongly secular cast of mind gives him the confidence to contest some of O'Connor's own statements about her work, grants that

fall and redemption, nature and grace, sin and innocence--every one of her stories and novels revolves around these traditional Christian themes. (138)¹⁷

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" these supernatural, Christian elements are largely hidden behind a meticulously realistic, almost naturalistic, reproduction of the everyday. O'Connor provides the

¹⁷ For a similar opinion, see Hoffman 32.

key to this aspect of her poetics in the following statement:

The novelist is required to create the illusion of a whole world with believable people in it, and the chief difference between the novelist who is an orthodox Christian and the novelist who is merely a naturalist is that the Christian novelist believes in a larger universe. He believes the natural world contains the super-natural. And this doesn't mean that his obligation to portray the natural is less; it means it is greater. (quoted in Fickett and Gilbert 126)

In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" this larger frame of the supernatural containing the action may be only vaguely sensed during the first reading. However, once the action is defined, an unmistakable pattern becomes clear.

Indeed, it is noticeable from the very first paragraph as the grandmother first reads about the sinister Misfit in the newspaper. "I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that loose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did", she remarks (9). This is an odd thing for her to say, upon reflection, because she is sitting safely at the breakfast table hundreds of miles away from The Misfit and the chance of her ever meeting with him must be extremely remote. However, the remark works on the surface level as an example of the grandmother's ridiculous, self-important manner. Also, we know she is desperately trying to magnify the obstacles to the trip, "seizing every chance to change Bailey's mind" (9).

Then, oddly, she brings up The Misfit again at the gas station, this time while talking with Red Sammy and his wife:

"Did you read about that criminal, The Misfit, that's escaped?" asked the grandmother.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he didn't attack this place right here," said the woman. "If he hears about it being here, I wouldn't be none surprised to see him. If he hears it's two cent in the cash register, I wouldn't be a tall surprised if he . . ."

"That'll do," Red Sam said. "Go bring these people their Co'Colas." (15-16)

Again the scene works on the literal level as simply more idle chatter from the gabby old grandmother and a realistic portrait of two silly Southerners. And yet the humour is undercut by the sudden, strange, and uncalled for seriousness of Red Sammy's gruff "That'll do". Again there is a fleeting presentiment of danger, a feeling that there is more to O'Connor's picture than meets the eye. Such hints prepare the reader for the revelation of the supernatural to come.

When the grandmother first sees The Misfit, she finds that "his face was familiar to her as if she had known him all her life" (21). And just before he shoots her she experiences a deeper, mysterious recognition, a kind of epiphany:

The grandmother's head cleared for an instant. She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" (29)

This scene carries at least the undertone of a religious awakening or recognition for the grandmother

as she seems to comprehend that on some level she is responsible for The Misfit. (Just how she might be so is the subject for another study.)

Finally, when The Misfit speaks, he speaks, astonishingly, about religion--specifically, about sin and redemption. In fact, the entire, long, climactic conversation between the grandmother and The Misfit is about, of all things, Jesus.

Taken together these passages indicate that the grandmother and The Misfit do indeed have some inevitable, although mysterious, connection. The apparent randomness of their encounter and its position in the plot call attention to this inevitability. The mere arrival of The Misfit out of the blue, as it were, implies some higher, supernatural cause bringing the two of them together. Indeed, The Misfit himself half-perceives this when--in his twisted way--he implies that he has acted as an instrument for the Good on the old woman's behalf: "'She would of been a good woman,' The Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life'" (29).

Such a structure, like that of *Oedipus the King*, again presents two levels of explanation--the human and the supernatural. By giving the central event alone no rational cause, it calls into question our usual way of accounting for events solely in terms of the material and the human. It is thus just the reverse of the plot-structure of the familiar mystery story in which a clever sleuth of some sort finds a simple, easily

intelligible cause-and-effect chain of everyday events to explain away what before had seemed dark and mysterious. Indeed "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" could be seen as an anti-detective story leading away from the explicable into that which is mysterious and beyond explanation.

This violent reversal from the everyday and the banal into the eternal makes the plot-structure capable of an unusually powerful release of fear and awe. It presents a vision of drastic, unexpected, and inexorable transformation by way of divine intervention. At the same time, the action seems absolutely plausible, because, as I have tried to show above, all other events are carefully linked by cause and effect, and because O'Connor has hinted at the presence of a non-human causation from the beginning.

Yet whatever the role of the divine in bringing The Misfit and the grandmother together, and however powerfully it affects the reader, it is the grandmother herself who seals her fate by telling The Misfit that she knows who he is. Again, it is fallibility that is the most basic condition for release.

The discussion so far has made clear that unity of action can indeed function, and function powerfully, in the way Aristotle describes. Nevertheless, the examination of *Heart of Darkness* in Chapter I revealed that although an active problem may remain unspecified until well into the story, the plot may still possess

unity of action. And this chapter has argued that the great merit of unity of action--release--depends primarily on fallibility, not on an the absolutely lucid sequence of exclusively human causes as described by Aristotle.

It has become apparent, then, that unity of action is a more open and flexible kind of unity than that created by exclusively human causes as conceived in the *Poetics*. The next chapter uses this understanding as a basis for considering the role of action within the greater unity of the story as a whole.

Chapter III

Action and Unity

Action, as effective and powerful a means of unity as it is, is certainly not the only way to unify a story, as even the most cursory glance at a random selection of stories will show. The modern novel in particular has looked for and found its own ways of unifying such disparate material as dreams, reportage, speculative essays, and interior monologue. Obviously, the classical conception of unity of action is simply too restrictive to provide the overall means of coherence in such cases. Some other means of unity must be in operation. Yet even highly complex and "experimental" works by authors like Franz Kafka, Hermann Broch, James Joyce, and William Faulkner seem to contain a narrative core of unified action, whatever the greater unifying principle of the work as a whole may be. Indeed, the more complex and disparate the various parts of a novel are, the more useful the concept of unified action becomes in unlocking the relationships of these parts to the whole, and thus to an understanding of the work. The dependence of theme on the active question, as established in chapter I, proves a particularly helpful conception in comprehending the unity of complex stories.

In this chapter I attempt to account for the greater unity of an entire work by means of this narrative core of action in two complex and unconventionally structured stories: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Heart of Darkness*. Both stories have a strong, unified action containing many features of the classical dramatic plot-structure I have defined it above. In both stories action forms the basis of the work's structure. Yet in each story the relation of the action is not an end in itself but, rather, the means to another end. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* this end is grasping "the enigma of the self" (Art 23). In *Heart of Darkness* it is transmitting the enigma of an experience.

The Action of The Unbearable Lightness of Being

The Unbearable Lightness of Being is built on the foundation of a single unified action with a beginning, a middle, and an end. However, since the novel's compositional complexity may make it seem like anything but a dramatic plot-structure, my assertion could do with some evidence.

To begin with, I shall briefly summarise the action alone, leaving out all other elements. The single unified action related by the plot is the story of how the two main characters move from spiritual separation to monogamous union. In the beginning Tomas and Tereza fall in love, live together, and are soon married. But they are unhappy because Tomas cannot

stop womanizing and Tereza cannot put up with it. The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia forces them to emigrate. After a few months Tereza returns to Czechoslovakia on her own. Tomas quickly follows because he is miserable without her. Back in Czechoslovakia he loses his job and becomes a window-washer, which makes his womanizing more active than ever. In a final effort to accommodate Tomas, Tereza tries to have an affair herself with a man who turns out to be (probably) an agent for the secret police. In order to escape from this affair as well as from Tomas's ever-multiplying "erotic friendships", they move to the country. There, in their isolation, the problem resolves itself, and the two at last find contentment.

My next task is to identify the elements of the plot. The active problem is Tomas's womanizing. Tomas is a believer in "erotic friendship", afraid of the oppression of love. He has lived most of his adult life in the understanding that he "was not born to live side by side with any woman and could be fully himself only as a bachelor. He tried to design his life in such a way that no woman could move in with a suitcase" (*Being 10*). Tereza on the other hand is completely committed to Tomas from the start. She feels no indecision about living with him. She knows this is exactly what she wants. Although Tomas finds, for reasons he cannot grasp, that he actually loves Tereza, he cannot give up his erotic friendships. This hurts

Tereza almost unbearably, a pain which, through a process which Kundera terms "compassion", Tomas experiences himself:¹

Was he genuinely incapable of abandoning his erotic friendships? He was. It would have torn him apart. He lacked the strength to control his taste for other women. . . .

But was it still a matter of pleasure? Even as he set out to visit another woman, he found her distasteful and promised himself he would not see her again. He constantly had Tereza's image before his eyes, and the only way he could erase it was by quickly getting drunk. (*Being* 21)

Thus, the situation is intolerable for both Tomas and Tereza. Both of them have an irresistible need for the other, but she cannot live with his womanizing and he cannot live without it.

The disturbance, then, is Tereza's arrival. For this reason the action begins at the moment Tomas starts to realise both the implications of inviting Tereza to stay with him on the one hand and the implications of never seeing her again on the other. It does not begin, as a novel very well might, in Tomas's or Tereza's childhood or with earlier love affairs or with the story of how they met, though incidents from all of these appear in the novel.

Since *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is not the story of Tomas or of Tereza, the "middle" does not relate everything of interest that has happened to or between them. Rather, as the story of an *action*--their movement from separation to union--it contains only

¹ See *Being* 19-21.

those events and acts which change Tomas and Tereza and allow the spiritual gulf between them to be bridged.

This spiritual movement from separation to union is most strikingly reflected in terms of physical distance. In chapter 3, at the very beginning of the narrative, Tereza is literally some hundred and twenty-five miles from Tomas (6). The last chapter, near its close, has an image of Tomas and Tereza as close as they can be, dancing in each other's arms; "On they danced to the strains of the piano and violin. Tereza leaned her head on Tomas's shoulder" (313). The book ends with a similar vivid picture of unity as things again achieve a state of balance.

The book does not end with the death of Tomas and Tereza, although their death is indeed narrated nearly 200 pages before the last chapter. If this seems like an odd circumstance, it is due to thinking of plot in terms of character rather than of action.² The deciding factor in this regard is relevance to the active problem. The death of Tomas and Tereza has no bearing on their active problem. However, it does have bearing on *Sabina's* active problem, and, consequently, it is narrated in the sub-plot of Franz and Sabina.

In the conventional poetics of the novel of character, the death of the protagonist, if it appears in the narrative, forms the end of the story. But, again, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is not the story of the life of Tomas and Tereza; it is the story

² See, for example, Becher 154.

of their love.³ At the point where their death is narrated the active problem is still a long way from resolution, and therefore the plot must continue. It is only when the active problem has been resolved that the story calls for nothing more.

Unity through Existential Code

Clearly *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* relates a single unified action with a definite beginning, middle, and end. Yet if one were to take into account only those parts of the novel that relate these events, one would have a much thinner novel indeed. There is the sub-plot of Sabina and Franz, which makes up the whole of part 3. None of part 6 seems connected to the action either.

In the profusion of brief chapters, some tell the story of Tereza and Tomas, some tell Franz's story, some tell Sabina's, and some are not narrative at all. Some seem like small, abstract essays on various themes. Others relate episodes from the characters' lives which, although interesting and informative, often have no clear bearing on the action. (For the sake of convenience, I will refer to these three major types of expression in the novel as action, thought, and biographical episode from now on.) How are all these unified with the action I identified above?

³ For helpful insights on distinguishing story subjects, see Lämmert 42.

It is easy enough to declare that the short essay-like sections are connected to the action thematically. For instance, the thoughts on Parmenides, lightness, and weight in chapter two have very clear thematic connections to the story of Tomas and Tereza which Kundera makes quite explicit.⁴ However, I have been contending that action--not thought--is the soul of this novel. Therefore, should not the essential connection of these essay chapters to the rest of the story be found in terms of *action*? Likewise, there are facile connections between the biographical episodes and the story proper: Tereza's relationship to her mother helps explain her relationship to Tomas, for instance. But is it possible to do more than just reveal these connections? Is it possible to account for their arrangement in the novel by looking at action?

The principle of unity on which Kundera has arranged the novel is his concept of the "existential code" of the characters. The term "existential code" means the conditions and perceptions of the world by which the character lives. The overall aim of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is to understand the "enigma of the self" of his characters by revealing their existential codes.

This aim may seem like a character-centered approach to the novel. And indeed it is. In his non-

⁴ See, for example, *Being* 29-35, 193-8, 222-3, 236-40.

fiction volume, *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera asserts that

all novels, of every age, are concerned with the enigma of the self. As soon as you create an imaginary being, a character, you are automatically confronted by the question: What is the self? How can the self be grasped? (Art 23)

He finds there have been various responses to this question. Early prose stories centered on action because

it is through action that man steps forth from the repetitive universe of the everyday where each person resembles every other person; it is through action that he distinguishes himself from others and becomes an individual. (Art 23)

Another possibility for grasping the enigma of the self, which developed in reaction to the novel of action, is to reveal the invisible, interior life of the characters. This is the so-called "psychological novel", for want of a more precise category.

However, Kundera himself chooses neither of these solutions. For Kundera,

to apprehend the self . . . means to grasp the essence of its existential problem. To grasp its *existential code*. As I was writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words. For Tereza: body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas: lightness, weight. (Art 29)

This differs from merely portraying the interior life of a character. To reveal a character's existential code means to understand *both* the character's interior life *and* the "trap" of the situation in which he finds himself (*Being* 25-7). "Situation", as established in

chapter I, is the beginning of an action, and "trap" or "existential problem" are analogues for "active problem"--the problem or dilemma forced upon the protagonist through the disturbance and the conditions of the situation. For instance, to apply Kundera's ideas to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's existential code would consist of everything in the story about his interior life (relatively little) and the "trap" of his situation--the wish to keep his *trawthe*, the wish to stay alive, the expectations placed on him by chivalry and by religion as evidenced at Bertilak's castle, and so forth. Thus, Kundera's approach to the novel--revealing the characters' existential code--synthesises the novel of character (the "psychological novel") and the novel of action.

Nevertheless, for Kundera, action is still "the eternal question of the novel" (Art 58). Action makes up the bulk of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and non-narrative passages appear when they have some bearing on or connection to events of the plot, not vice versa. Thus, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* can be said to possess unity of action in the sense that its various elements are organised around the action. However, the relation of the action alone is not the *aim* of the novel but rather the search for the characters' existential codes. It is this aim that accounts for the inclusion of the various elements. In the following two sections I examine the relation of

the non-narrative passages to the action with respect to the existential code as the means of unity.

Thought

Kundera states that the existential code cannot be "examined *in abstracto*; it reveals itself progressively in the action, in the situations" (Art 30). In other words, they are the relatively abstract formulations or examinations of a character's existential code which then reveals itself in the action. For instance, chapter 2 of part 5 begins:

Anyone who thinks that the Communist regimes of Central Europe are exclusively the work of criminals is overlooking a basic truth: the criminal regimes were made not by criminals but by enthusiasts convinced they had discovered the only road to paradise. (*Being* 176)

The first part of the chapter becomes a short essay on whether or not a man is innocent because he did not know he was committing a crime. Written in the language and tone of a speculative essay, this segment does not appear related to the action of the story. On the surface it is merely an interesting question related only tangentially to Tereza and Tomas because they happen to be living under a Communist regime many members of which claim to be innocent of wrong-doing through ignorance. Then, halfway through the chapter a connection emerges:

When Tomas heard Communists shouting in defense of their inner purity, he said to himself, As a result of your "not knowing," this country has lost its freedom, lost it for centuries, perhaps, and you shout that you feel no guilt? How can you stand the sight of what you've done? How is it you aren't horrified? . . . If you had eyes, you would have to put them out and wander away from Thebes! (*Being* 177)

At this point the action of Tomas and Tereza, which the essay has temporarily suspended, is taken up again, for it is Tomas's creation of this analogy which leads him to write an article comparing the ignorance of the Communist leaders to Oedipus's ignorance. For writing the article Tomas eventually gets fired from his job. This leads to him becoming a window-washer, which, in turn, leads to a substantial increase in his womanizing. And with this event the novel is right back in the middle of the active problem.

Thus, what seems at first to be a topical political issue (Were the Czech Communist Party officials guilty of the country's misfortunes or did they act in good faith?) becomes an ethical issue (Is a person innocent because ignorant?) which then links up with the action on a political level (Tomas is told by the government authorities to retract the article or lose his job) and finally becomes an event in the action of the love story of Tomas and Tereza. Indeed, it brings about the crisis. This transformation of a public issue into a private one shows the relation of the *context* of the thought segment beginning chapter 2 to the action proper. But why is it necessary? Why could the thought segment not be omitted?

Again, the key to the thought passage's relation to the action is to be found in the idea of the existential code. As noted above, for Kundera, the purpose of the plot is not just to depict acts but to seek out their causes in the conditions of the situation under which the character exists. In this case, the six or seven paragraphs written in the style of an essay illuminate, in abstract terms, the situation that causes Tomas to write the article and to be persecuted for it. They identify the relevant themes in his mind: guilt, ignorance, innocence, and knowledge. These in turn have connections to the most important poles in Tomas's existential code: lightness and weight. Does ignorance of the atrocities being committed absolve the officials of responsibility (lightness) or are they, even in ignorance, burdened with accountability (weight)? And these are the considerations and conditions from which Tomas acts.

Narrative alone could not accomplish this purpose. If the essay segment were omitted, the reader would see only events: Tomas wrote an article comparing the government officials' claims of innocence to Oedipus's, he got fired, and so forth. The causal link--that is, the existential code--would be missing, and events (such as Tomas's writing the letter) would appear causeless and arbitrary. In this light the thought segments are not departures from the plot at all; they are further links in the chain of cause and effect.

Furthermore, the speculative nature of the essay style allows Kundera to reintroduce the Oedipus motif-- another component of Tomas's existential code.⁵ In Tomas's mind the Oedipus story, as well as other myths concerning an abandoned child, is a symbol for his relation to Tereza. This perception of his, in turn, has a causal link with the writing of the article:

"What I wonder is what made me write the thing in the first place," said Tomas, and just then he remembered: She had landed at his bedside like a child sent downstream in a bulrush basket. Yes, that was why he had picked up the book [i.e. *Oedipus*] and gone back to the stories of Romulus, Moses, and Oedipus. (*Being* 218-19)

Thus, "Oedipus", as a part of Tomas's existential code, has a direct bearing on his acts which bring about the final resolution of the active problem. And it is the thought passage which brings this connection to light.

It should be pointed out, however, that Kundera believes any character's self could never be completely grasped and must ultimately remain an enigma (*Art* 25).

Most of the thought passages in the novel function in the two ways identified above. The one conspicuous

⁵ Kundera defines "motif" as "an element of the theme or of the story that appears several times over the course of the novel, always in a different context" (*Art* 84).

and troublesome exception is the whole of part 6. It can be outlined as follows:

- Chapters 1-2 An episode about the death of Stalin's son.
- Chapters 3-5 A definition of kitsch (i.e. the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being).
- Chapters 6-7 Two episodes from Sabina's life, dealing with kitsch.
- Chapter 8 Characteristics of kitsch.
- Chapters 9-10 Varieties of kitsch.
- Chapters 11-12 Two further episodes from Sabina's life dealing with kitsch.
- Chapter 13 The Grand March defined as political kitsch.
- Chapters 14-15 The story of Franz and the march on Cambodia.
- Chapter 16 Reflections on national strain of kitsch.
- Chapters 17-22 The story of Franz and the march on Cambodia continued.
- Chapter 23 An essay on Franz's motivation for going to Cambodia.
- Chapter 24 A comparison of Franz to Tomas's son in terms of kitsch.
- Chapter 25 A short narration from Sabina's later life.
- Chapter 26 The story of Franz and the march on Cambodia completed.
- Chapter 27 Franz's death and burial.
- Chapter 28 The burial of Franz and Tomas as examples of kitsch.
- Chapter 29 A further definition of kitsch (i.e. The stopover between being and oblivion)

The outline reveals that the dominant topic of part 6 is kitsch. Eleven of the chapters are wholly non-narrative and deal with kitsch reflectively, seven clearly serve as illustrations of the ideas discussed in the non-narrative segments, ten tell the story of Franz in Cambodia, and the remaining chapter, chapter 23, seems not to conveniently fit into any of the other categories. However, none of these chapters seems related to the novel's action.

For example, chapter 3 of part 6 is a short essay on God and shit. Kundera observes that shit is incompatible with the idea of a perfect God:

Shit is a more onerous theological problem than is evil. Since God gave man freedom, we can, if need be, accept the idea that He is not responsible for man's crimes. The responsibility for shit, however, rests entirely with Him, the Creator of man. (*Being* 246)

Kundera reasons, therefore, that either God and his world are not perfect, or there is nothing wrong with shit. The chapter is humorous and the tone clearly playful, but can humour be the only reason for its inclusion? What is its place in the otherwise rigorous structure of this novel?

Part 6, as Kundera explains, is a digression:

Digression means: abandoning the story for a moment. All of the reflection on kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* . . . is a digression: I leave off telling the novel's story to go at my theme (kitsch) *directly*. (*Art* 84)

The connection to the action, then, is thematic. For instance, part 6, titled *The Grand March*, is a critique

of the liberal idea of the brotherhood of man. The participants in the kitsch-ridden Grand March to Cambodia along the "only road to paradise" are shown to be the Western counterparts of the people who forced Tomas out of his job. Similarly, Tomas is tormented by the thought that pursuing an exclusive love for one woman--and indeed marriage itself--might well be kitsch. Certainly Sabina, his mistress, considers his feelings for Tereza to be kitsch. But apart from these thematic connections, part 6 has no relation to the action.

The difference between a digression like part 6 and a thought segment as in chapter 2, part 5, is that the thought segment never *abandons* the action. It is not connected to the main action through theme, but as above, by cause and effect. Part 6, on the other hand, could be omitted from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* with no harm whatsoever to the *action* of the story, since it is not part of the cause-and-effect sequence. What happens to Franz in Cambodia, for example, has no bearing at all on Tomas or Tereza. It is not linked in any way to the chain of cause and effect--not even as an exploration of their "existential codes". It is true that kitsch does figure as a key word in the existential situation in which Tomas and Tereza find themselves, but no event from part 6 functions as either a cause or an effect in the main story. This is true even of the one event in part 6 in which Tomas and Tereza appear (or rather, disappear): their burial. As

shown above, the deaths of Tomas and Tereza are not part of the unified action since this is the story of their love, not of their lives. Again, to make the contrast clear, a reflective yet non-digressive segment like the beginning of chapter 2, part 5, *is* part of the unified action because it functions as a cause for subsequent events in the story.

Biographical Episodes

After the action and the thought segments, there is the third category--the biographical. These are generally short, narrative episodes from the lives of the characters.⁶ However, they do not belong to the plot as such in that they relate events *outside* the main action. What, then, is their function and how are they unified with the action?

All of the biographical episodes can be subdivided into three general types with differing functions: 1) those that illustrate an abstract formulation of an existential condition of a particular character, 2) those that enrich the reader's general understanding of the "self" of a particular character, 3) those that illustrate thought.

An example of the first type occurs in chapter 10 of part 3. While living in Paris, Sabina learns of the deaths of Tomas and Tereza and goes to the Montparnasse cemetery to calm herself:

⁶ For a more or less representative cross-section in *Being*, see: 55-6, 62-6, 85, 109-10, 195-6, 201-4, and 249-50.

Walking along a row of graves, she noticed people gathering for a burial. The funeral director had an armful of flowers and was giving one to each mourner. He handed one to Sabina as well. She joined the group. They made a detour past many monuments before they came to the grave, free for the moment of its heavy gravestone. She leaned over the hole. It was extremely deep. . . . In Bohemia the graves were not so deep. In Paris the graves were deeper, just as the buildings were taller. Her eye fell on the stone, which lay next to the grave. It chilled her and she hurried home. (*Being* 123)

This episode takes place approximately a year after the main action of the main story has ended, and is not causally connected to it. It does not in any way advance the plot and could be omitted without any effect on the sequence of events. Neither does it have any effect on the sub-plot--the story of Sabina and Franz--since that has finished some three years previous to the episode in the graveyard. Its purpose lies elsewhere. For the moment I shall grant the character Sabina's relevance to the main action and concentrate only on this episode's purpose outside the plot. Sabina, as the reader learns in the beginning of part 3, has a long history of betrayal which means, for her, "breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown" (*Being* 91).

"Betrayal", then, is a word in Sabina's existential code and is associated with lightness. The episode in the graveyard functions as an illustration of this part of her existential condition, which Kundera has formulated in a thought segment at the beginning of the chapter:

Her drama was not a drama of heaviness but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being.

Until that time, her betrayals had filled her with excitement and joy, because they opened up new paths to new adventures of betrayal. But what if the paths came to an end? One could betray one's parents, husband, country, love, but when parents, husband, country, and love were gone-- what was left to betray? (*Being* 122)

Kundera explains the relationship of the graveyard episode to this condition as follows. The image of the stone she has seen sitting beside the grave stays with her. She thinks of it all day. "Why had it horrified her so? She answered herself: When graves are covered with stones, the dead can no longer get out" (*Being* 123). And this thought is unbearable for Sabina because she is a woman who is constantly betraying, breaking ranks, going off into the unknown. The heaviness of the stone--having to stay put--is the antithesis of her existential condition. Thus, the graveyard episode illustrates by means of a visual *image* (the deep hole and the stone) the conditions and perceptions under which Sabina acts. However, it is not essential to the Sabina-Franz sub-plot nor to the Tomas-Tereza plot.

An example of the second type of biographical episode--those that increase general knowledge of the character's "self"--occurs in chapter 6 of part 2.

It happens many years before Tereza meets Tomas while she is still a girl:

Once her mother decided to go naked in the winter when the lights were on. Tereza quickly ran to pull the curtains so that no one could see her from across the street. . . . The following day her mother had some friends over. . . . Tereza and the sixteen-year-old son of one of them came in at one point to say hello, and her mother immediately took advantage of their presence to tell how Tereza had tried to protect her mother's modesty. She laughed, and all the women laughed with her. "Tereza can't reconcile herself to the idea that the human body pisses and farts," she said. Tereza turned bright red, but her mother would not stop. "What's so terrible about that?" and in answer to her own question she broke wind loudly. All the women laughed again. (*Being* 45)

The purpose of this episode is not, as it might at first glance seem, exactly like that of Sabina's graveyard episode, for it is not a depiction of a particular existential state. Kundera gives no abstract formulation of what this episode means, as he does at the end of the graveyard episode. Neither is this a psychological *analysis* with a Freudian emphasis on the mother; Kundera does not trace the effect of the episode on Tereza's personality. Rather, this episode from Tereza's youth stands without any interpretation--as pure incident the significance of which lies imbedded in the action itself and its position in the novel.

This is not to say that Kundera gives the reader no direction. The episode comes early in part 2 which is entitled "Soul and Body". Two chapters earlier Kundera remarks:

She took after her mother, and not only physically. I sometimes have the feeling that her entire life was merely a continuation of her mother's, much as the course of a ball on the billiard table is merely the continuation of the player's arm movement. (*Being* 41)

This is vital information, not in order to understand a specific situation (i.e. the one existing between Tereza and her mother), but in order to better understand Tereza's "self", in order to be able to account for her enigmatic feelings towards Tomas and towards his womanizing, for example.

Two chapters after the curtain-pulling episode, Tereza first meets Tomas: "He called to her in a kind voice, and Tereza felt her soul rushing up to the surface through her blood vessels and pores to show itself to him" (*Being* 48). It would be impossible to understand this figure without the episode from chapter 6 (and several others like it), for the reader would not have seen how Tereza regarded her body and soul and why she thinks it necessary to keep her soul "below decks" like the crew of a ship. Tereza feels her soul drawn to Tomas; she feels he is calling to her soul. This aspect of her love for him, this cause, would also be obscure without the contrast to her mother's vulgarity. Thus, the episode is *causally* connected to the chain of events belonging to the main action. However, the link is quite distant. One could hardly regard this incident as part of the cause-effect sequence. Rather its main function is to depict Tereza's "self".

The third type of biographical episode functions as the illustration of thought--of an abstract idea. One of the most interesting examples comes at the beginning of part 6, "The Grand March"--the extended definition of kitsch already discussed. As a digression, "The Grand March" is not connected to the main action, so to demonstrate how this type of biographical episode works in it, I shall treat it as if it were a story unto itself, separate from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

The episode tells of the death of Stalin's son Yakov:

Captured by the Germans during the Second World War, he was placed in a camp together with a group of British officers. They shared a latrine. Stalin's son habitually left a foul mess. The British officers resented having their latrine smeared with shit, even if it was the shit of the son of the most powerful man in the world. . . . They brought [the matter] to his attention again and again, and tried to make him clean the latrine. He raged, argued, and fought. Finally, he demanded a hearing with the camp commander. He wanted the commander to act as arbiter. But the arrogant German refused to talk about shit. Stalin's son could not stand the humiliation. Crying out to heaven the most terrifying of Russian curses, he took a running jump into the electrified barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp. He hit the target. His body, which would never again make a mess of the Britishers' latrine, was pinned to the wire. (*Being* 243)

After this episode come eleven chapters on kitsch which are related to the episode of Yakov's death through the word "shit". Then, abruptly, the action of Franz's adventure in Cambodia begins. To illustrate how completely unrelated to the beginning of part 6 it seems, I recount some of the action below:

A group of important Western intellectuals will travel to Thailand and march to the Cambodia border, thereby hoping to force the Cambodian authorities to allow an international medical committee to enter the famine-racked country. Franz (one of Sabina's lovers) has agreed to join the march and finds himself in Bangkok at the group's press conference.

The French intellectuals arrive, dismayed to find that a group of American intellectuals is already presiding over the proceedings and conducting the press conference in English. The French feel slighted and humiliated since the march was their idea anyway. They protest:

So high were their principles that they refused to protest in English, and made their case . . . in their mother tongue. The Americans, not understanding a word, reacted with friendly, agreeing smiles. In the end, the French had no choice but to frame their objection in English. . . .

Though amazed at so curious an objection, the Americans, still smiling, acquiesced: the meeting would be run bilingually. . . . Then, every sentence had to resound in both English and French, which made the discussion take twice as long, or rather more than twice as long, since all the French . . . kept interrupting the interpreter to correct him.
(*Being* 260)

The meeting proceeds and an American actress makes an impassioned speech in which she mentions President Carter. An angry French doctor jumps up shouting:

"We're here to cure dying people, not to pay homage to President Carter! Let's not turn this into an American propaganda circus! We're not here to protest against Communism! We're here to save lives!" (*Being* 260-1)

What is the connection of these episodes? What does Yakov's son have to do with the American actress or the French doctor? Obviously the two episodes are in no way part of the same plot. There is no unity of action to "The Grand March". And, even with the understanding that the whole of "The Grand March" is about kitsch, the connection between these episodes remains obscure. The press conference in the hotel is perhaps an illustration of kitsch, but what does Yakov's death have to do with that concept?

Kundera does not clarify the connection until chapter 22. At this point, the marchers have marched to the Cambodian border and are at one end of a bridge separating the two countries. They shout their demand to be let into the country three times but are met only by silence from the Cambodian guards. Standing at the border waiting, Franz suddenly feels an urge to run screaming onto the bridge and die in a hail of bullets.

That sudden desire of Franz's reminds us of something; yes, it reminds us of Stalin's son, who ran to electrocute himself on the barbed wire when he could no longer stand to watch the poles of human existence come so close to each other as to touch, when there was no longer any difference between sublime and squalid, angel and fly, God and shit.

Franz could not accept the fact that the glory of the Grand March was equal to the comic vanity of its marchers. (*Being* 268)

Franz's desire to die is the wish to deny shit and affirm kitsch. And the function of the short episode about Yakov's death is to illustrate precisely the same idea. Franz's death wish also forms the unifying link

between the episode of Yakov's death (shit) and the episode of the press conference ("the comic vanity of the marchers"). Thus, despite its narrative cast, the main function of this type of episode is the exploration of thought.

To summarise this analysis of unity in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, then, the major portion of the novel tells the action of the love story of Tomas and Tereza. It is a unified action with a dramatic plot-structure. Nevertheless, the principle of unity at work within the novel as a whole is not action but Kundera's attempt to grasp the "enigma of the self" of his characters through the concept of the existential code.

Within the main action, I have differentiated two means of expression: narrative and thought. Though the thought sections seem digressive, they are in fact links in the cause-effect chain and thus part of the plot. The reflective style is necessary since Kundera sees a character's actions as resulting from its existential code, which must be elucidated both discursively through thought and concretely through narrative.

Further, the novel contains numerous episodes from the characters' lives which occur outside the main action. These function either to illustrate an abstract formulation of a component of a character's existential code, to increase understanding of the character generally, or to illustrate thought.

In addition, part 3 of the novel relates the subplot of Sabina's and Franz's affair. Part 3 is tangentially related to the main action through Sabina's appearance in both plots, and more importantly through its treatment of the same themes as the main action. Internally, it is organised according to these themes, although it also simultaneously presents an action. Part 6, on the other hand, is a digression. Its subject is kitsch, and thus it maintains a loose thematic connection to the main action. Internally, the episodes of part 6 are connected only through theme.

The unity of action in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, then, is a much less restrictive kind than that put forth in the *Poetics*. It allows the author not only to bring in many episodes outside the strict cause-effect sequence of the main action but also to stop the story altogether and to digress both narratively and discursively on themes of the main action.

More significantly, Kundera has relied heavily on what is, in essence, an Aristotelian plot-structure for the main action. Yet his aim--to understand the existential problem of his characters--is obviously at odds with Aristotle's assertion that "both happiness and unhappiness rest on action" (37; ch. 6). For Kundera, happiness and unhappiness are rooted neither in character as such, nor in action as the movement from prosperity to adversity or vice versa, but in the

existential situation in which the character finds himself. And where Aristotle maintains that "the events and plot-structure are the goal" (37; ch. 6), Kundera finds the delineation of the existential situation to be the ultimate goal. That Kundera's aims should diverge so sharply from those set down by Aristotle and yet still be responsible for a novel with an essentially classical plot-structure is an indication of the flexibility and power of the dramatic plot-structure based on action.

The Action of Heart of Darkness

Heart of Darkness contains, generally speaking, three different means of expression. The first is the straightforward narrative of the main action. The second is Marlow's discursive commentary on the (usually metaphysical) significance of the events of his story. The third is the descriptive episodes that do not figure in the cause-and-effect sequence of the main action. Again, I will begin with the narrative of the main action and then attempt to show how the other two elements are unified with it.

Since, as noted in chapter I of this thesis, there is a persistent strain of Conrad criticism that confuses the story's active problem with Kurtz and his mysterious last words, "The horror!" (113; pt. 3), it

might be well to establish first of all what the action of *Heart of Darkness* is not.⁷

A careful look at the story in terms of plot-structure reveals it simply cannot be Kurtz's action. Conrad never gives nearly enough information about Kurtz to say what his main problem might be or might have been. Hence, it is also unclear what his super-objective might be. Further, if Kurtz is the main character, the story lacks a disturbance. Consequently it is impossible to locate any denouement or indeed any plot in the story; the action is completely episodic and unstructured.

Yet even assuming, for the sake of argument, that the above were not true, if the main conflict of the story is to be about Kurtz, it follows that the complication and denouement cannot even begin until Kurtz figures in the story. Since Kurtz is not mentioned, however, even in passing, until Marlow gets to the Company Station, at least a third of the entire story would become irrelevant to the real problem. More accurately, nearly half of it would become irrelevant, since Kurtz only functions as part of the cause-effect chain from roughly the middle of the tale. Such a slack and meandering structure would run entirely counter to Conrad's insistence, according to Ford Madox Ford, that "every word set on paper--every word set on paper--must carry the story forward" (210).

⁷ For an extended and typical example of the "The horror!" strain of *Heart of Darkness* criticism, see Berthoud.

As long ago as 1958, Albert J. Guerard wrote:

It is time to recognize that the story is not primarily about Kurtz or about the brutality of Belgian officials, but about Marlow its narrator. (20)

And yet (in 1984), Peter Brooks still overlooks the plot of Marlow's story in favour of the non-existent, yet somehow inferable plot of Kurtz's story:

Marlow is in a state of belatedness or secondariness in relation to the forerunner; his journey is a repetition, which gains its meaning from its attachment to the prior journey. . . . Marlow's narrative is not primary: it attaches itself to another's story, seeking there its authority; it retraces another's path, repeats a journey already undertaken. (244-5)

Brooks concludes that Marlow's own story "has become narratable only in relation to Kurtz's" (245). Such a conclusion is only possible to the extent that Marlow, the teller of his own tale, is ignored. Brooks directly contradicts, among other things, Marlow's own statement of what the story is about:

To understand the effect of it on *me* you ought to know how *I* got out there, what *I* saw, how *I* went up that river to the place where *I* first met the poor chap. (32; pt. 1; emphasis added.)

Marlow's intent is clearly not to "retell" Kurtz's story, but, just as he says, to tell his own story in order to re-create for his listeners the effect the journey had on him.

The encounter with Kurtz is indeed, as Marlow says, the climax of the experience. But a climax, by nature, is only meaningful as part of a larger action containing it. The narrator makes very clear that the

meaning of Marlow's tales does *not* lie on the inside like the kernel of a nut, as Kurtz lies at the Inner Station, but envelops the entire story. It stands to reason, then, that the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* is to be found less in the parts of the story involving Kurtz, than the much larger action surrounding him, that is, the journey itself.

Of course there is nothing that requires the events of *Heart of Darkness* to have been structured according to the model, disturbance-active problem-resolution. It is, theoretically, perfectly possible for Conrad to have had no such structure in mind as he composed the story. But it would seem highly unlikely, to say the least, that Conrad set out to tell the story of Kurtz with no particular structure in mind and while so doing inadvertently composed a highly Aristotelian plot-structure telling a story about Marlow. On the other hand, if Marlow is taken to be the protagonist, a strong, meaningful plot-structure is obviously present. In contrast to the cluttered, disconnected structure that a Kurtz-centred action would require, there is a single, unified action with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The plot-structure as a whole is similar to the dramatic plot with some notable exceptions. It begins in London when Marlow finds himself out of work. The "middle" includes his visit to the company's headquarters on the Continent and all the events at least until he leaves the Inner Station.

The end of the action is more problematic. Is it Kurtz's death? Is it actually the interview with the Intended? According to the given definition, the end of an action comes after the resolution of the active problem. To be able to locate the end of the action in *Heart of Darkness*, one must first know what the active problem is.

As I suggested in chapter I, Marlow's first problem, arising from the situation, is: How to find work? "Work" becomes an increasingly important theme word as Marlow progresses towards the heart of darkness, and, indeed, work versus savagery becomes one of the story's main oppositions. His second problem is a physical one which falls to him as his first assignment as skipper of the steamer: how to reach Kurtz. His third problem is metaphysical and personal: how to find some answer to the challenge that the company and the "darkness" he encounters present to his values.

If these are the problems that the plot solves, Marlow's return to Europe forms the end of the action. By the time Marlow leaves Africa, all three problems have been resolved to the extent they can be.

The plot-structure of *Heart of Darkness* does not possess unity of action, then. Nevertheless, this narrative unity is not always easy to see, because, as noted above, Marlow does not confine himself to merely narrating the events of his journey. He is continually interrupting the story in order to reflect and comment

on what his experiences mean, or to relate other episodes on the side. The following diagram shows only the cause-and-effect sequence of the action:

1. Marlow finds himself out of work and
2. He is reminded of his old desire to go to Africa *so*
3. He uses his aunt's connections to get command of a river boat in Africa, *so*
4. He arrives and first hears of Kurtz *but*
5. In order to get his boat he has to tramp 200 miles inland, *so*
6. He sets off and eventually reaches the Central Station where his boat should be, *but*
7. The boat is on the bottom of the river, *so*
8. He has to send for rivets and wait, *so*
9. He becomes disgusted with the life of the Europeans at the Central Station, learns much more about Kurtz, about his "irregularities", and about company politics, *so*
10. The manager's uncle arrives with the rivets (9), *so*
11. Marlow overhears the manager and uncle discussing Kurtz, *so*
12. He develops a wish to meet Mr. Kurtz, and
13. He repairs the boat and starts upriver, *so*
14. He comes across the Russian trader's hut and his note: "Hurry up and approach cautiously", *so*
15. The manager decides they should not approach the Central Station that night but wait until the following day, *so*
16. The next morning the fog is dense, and they must wait.
17. After the fog lifts they continue up the river and are attacked just before reaching the Inner Station, but the attackers are driven off, *so*

18. They finally reach the Inner Station and bring Kurtz on board with the intention of taking him back, *but*

19. Kurtz escapes, *so*

20. Marlow catches him and brings him back on board.

21. They make the return journey, but Kurtz dies.

22. Marlow also falls ill and arrives back in Europe.

The action so defined excludes, of course, the interview with the Intended. I will return to the place of this somewhat puzzling episode within the story later in the chapter. I continue now by noting the strong Aristotelian characteristics of the plot-structure I identified.

With Marlow as the protagonist, the plot describes a transformation whereby Marlow gains insight both into the evil in the world and in his own heart as well as into his ability to resist it. He undergoes a transformation from a state of relative ignorance to one of increased knowledge but also from relative happiness to grief.

The long complication includes events 1-12. The three problems identified above--finding, work, Kurtz, and relief--are fully knotted together at the Central station. The denouement begins as Marlow starts upriver at event 13. Marlow's arrival at the Inner Station is a reversal. Marlow has been thinking all along that meeting Kurtz will provide him with some answers and some relief from his disgust with the Company. It does just the opposite; the darkness is

worst of all at its heart. Indeed this is the central irony of the work: having risked his life to reach the Inner Station, Marlow does not find illumination; he finds even greater confusion. As Guetti has observed:

"Heart of Darkness", then, as an account of a journey into the center of things--of Africa, of Kurtz, of Marlow, and of human existence--poses itself as the refutation of such a journey and as the refutation of the general metaphorical conception that meaning may be found within, beneath, at the center. (502)

The climax of *Heart of Darkness* is the attack on the boat at event 17. Strangely enough, this riveting and crucial scene has been largely neglected in the critical literature.⁸ Yet it is the scene which depicts the final obstacle between Marlow and his super-objective, one of the longest and perhaps the most meticulously detailed scene in the story, and the only scene depicting physical violence. For these reasons, it demands serious attention in any study of the story's action. Hence a short detour on the subject will not be out of place.

What is it, then, that characterises this scene as the high-point of excitement? Firstly, there is an increase of tension and a feeling of impending menace through Conrad's use of familiar, suspense-building techniques such as the forced halt just below the Inner

⁸ For one of the few studies redressing this lack of attention, though in a somewhat different context from mine, see Stewart 321-3.

Station, thick fog, an inhuman scream from the bank, an invisible enemy, and an unnatural silence:

It was not sleep--it seemed unnatural, like a state of trance. Not the faintest sound of any kind could be heard. You looked on amazed, and began to suspect yourself of being deaf--then the night came suddenly, and struck you blind as well. (73; pt. 2)

Second, as the plot diagram reveals, both the seriousness and the rate of appearance of obstacles to Marlow's progress increase the closer he gets to Kurtz. By the eve of the attack (event 16) the situation has become life-threatening for the first time. The rate at which the obstacles appear begins to accelerate drastically at event 15, so that four major obstacles arise within about 18 hours. Elsewhere in the sequence, many days or weeks or months elapse between obstacles. In other words, around event 17 the action happens faster.

Simultaneously, time becomes increasingly distended. As Lämmert has shown, the appearance of time distortion is frequently a key to identifying "core" elements of the narrative (32). The section from nightfall the previous evening to the end of the attack takes up eight pages in my edition (with digressions subtracted). The actual fight itself takes over four pages although it could not have lasted more than five minutes.

Finally, the attack is described, with but one digression, in minute, sensory detail and in scenes. It is thus more *graphic* than the rest of the tale.

This intensifies the excitement, since the subject of the description is physical violence and a savage killing. The following passage typifies the use of concrete, sensory detail--its "graphicality"--throughout the entire section:

My feet felt so very warm and wet that I had to look down. The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up at me; both his hands clutched that cane. It was the shaft of a spear that, either thrown or lunged through the opening, had caught him in the side just below the ribs; the blade had gone in out of sight, after making a frightful gash; my shoes were full; a pool of blood lay very still, gleaming dark-red under the wheel; his eyes shone with an amazing lustre. . . . He looked at me anxiously, gripping the spear like something precious, with an air of being afraid I would try to take it away from him. (81-2 pt. 2)

Besides the accumulation of stark visual images, there is the shocking tactility of the warm blood and, in the instant before the passage just quoted, the "clatter" of the spear in the cabin as the helmsman falls.

These characteristics establish the scene as the story's climax. The subsequent scenes at the Inner Station are anti-climax in the literal sense: the scenes are not rendered in such acute detail and lack the intense, sensuous imagery. There is no distension of time and no violence. Marlow has reached his goal. The situation remains threatening, but the danger is more related than depicted and therefore not as exciting.

It might be objected that the climax as the "emotional high point" must be a rather subjective thing and will vary from person to person, that, for

instance, Kurtz's last words, "The horror!" (113; pt. 3) or that the "grove of death" with its description of the workers as "bundles of acute angles" (45; pt. 2) might be more emotionally affecting to this or that reader than the death of the helmsman. This is indisputable.

However, the criteria for identifying the climax do not have to do primarily with reader response but with structure. Two of these criteria are the construction of the scene--its "graphicality"--and its position in the plot. As I noted above, the attack on the boat is climactic by its very position as the last obstacle between Marlow and his super-objective. The stakes--the super-objective and life itself--are as high as possible at this point, hence, the level of excitement is high. The scene also has a vital function in the cause-effect sequence and could not be omitted without damage to the plot.

On the other hand, the scene at the grove of death, though indeed full of shocking and painful images with a high degree of "graphicality", nevertheless occupies a relatively unimportant position in the plot. There is little at stake for Marlow at the grove of death. Indeed it is here that the active problem first begins to become clear.

Likewise, Kurtz's last words, as devastating as they may be, are a poor candidate for the climax, since they utterly lack any "graphicality". "The horror!" (113; pt. 3) is a fairly abstract phrase compared to

the sentence, "A pool of blood lay very still, gleaming dark-red under the wheel" (82; pt. 2). It lacks sensory detail. Its impact does not come from its effect on the senses; it rests on what one *chooses* to infer from Kurtz's words rather than on any concrete image. Whatever fear it may provoke comes after one has first decided to what it refers.

By comparison, the death of the helmsman is shown to us as an immediately fearful image. We "witness" it. In this respect, I suggest that Kurtz's "The horror!" is to the stabbing of the helmsman what Hamlet's "The rest is silence" is to the stabbing of Laertes and Claudius. Hamlet's last words may be profound, may offer a dark and devastating final vision, but they do not put the spectators on the edge of their seats, as does the immediately preceding sword fight. Kurtz's last words may well be the climax of the story's meaning, but in no way are they the climax of the action.

To return to the analysis of the composition of the action, the scenes at the Inner Station, then, form the resolution of the active problem. This is why the return trip down the river is almost entirely narration with very few scenes. This is also the reason why Kurtz's death and Marlow's illness receive rather short shrift--e.g. "Mistah Kurtz--he dead" (112; pt. 3): they are not part of the action. In the same way, the deaths of Tomas and Tereza in *The Unbearable Lightness*

of Being are not part of the action and are mentioned only in passing.

Since Marlow's first problem--finding a job--is solved very early, the action mainly concerns the remaining problems: the physical struggle to get to Kurtz and the metaphysical struggle for answers. Thus, the action as a whole can be divided into two parts, the physical and the metaphysical. I shall first consider the physical struggle. Marlow must make the 200-mile tramp, raise the sunken boat, find rivets, withstand the apathy and climate at the Central Station, live with the Manager's ill will, and so forth. All of these barriers stand in the way of his meeting Kurtz while at the same time making him more and more desperate to do so.

The physical and metaphysical quests are gradually joined together. Certainly by event 12 the physical conflict has assumed a metaphysical dimension. That the situation is becoming morally intolerable for Marlow is evident in his description of the "pilgrims" at the Central Station in the following passage:

They beguiled the time by backbiting and intriguing against each other. . . . There was an air of plotting about that station, but nothing came of it, of course. It was as unreal as everything else-- . . . as their talk, as their government, as their show of work. (53-4; pt.1)

The journey has become not merely a journey towards the Inner Station but also, Marlow hopes, towards illumination, towards "a kind of light" (32; pt. 1).

As Marlow's dismay and disgust increase, he begins to think of Kurtz more and more as an answer:

I was curious to see . . . this man, who had come out equipped with moral ideas of some sort . . . and how he would set about his work. (62; pt. 1)

Thus, he is bitterly frustrated when he believes Kurtz has been killed.

There was a sense of extreme disappointment. . . . I couldn't have been more disgusted if I had travelled all this way for the sole purpose of talking with Mr Kurtz. . . . I couldn't have felt more of lonely desolation somehow, had I been robbed of a belief or had missed my destiny in life. (83; pt. 2)

Marlow's progress on the physical level, then, is a journey *towards* the Inner Station, and on the metaphysical level an escape *from* the Company.

However, the active question of the metaphysical level is difficult to formulate. Marlow never identifies exactly what is at stake on this level. Furthermore, the moral questions that bother him--the nature of evil, oppression, restraint, and so forth--are themselves fairly abstract issues. Unlike the decisive resolution of the active question on the physical level, the questions on the metaphysical level--the level of thought--are not resolved but end in contradiction.

One such unresolved problem is the question of restraint. Marlow wonders what it is that prevents a "civilized" man living in the heart of darkness from turning into a savage. Marlow himself finds the necessary restraint by keeping occupied with the

"surface truth", that is, through his work. On the journey upriver he sees the inhabitants dancing wildly. Part of him is horrified, part of him is attracted:

What thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity--like yours--the thought of your remote kinship. . . . You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no--I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments, be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woollen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steampipes--I tell you. I had to watch the steering, and circumvent those snags. . . . There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man. (69-70; pt. 2)

In other words, the physical struggle to keep the boat running keeps Marlow from the moral morass.

Next Marlow contradicts his ideas of restraint and surface truth with the example of the wood-cutters on board the steamboat. They are cannibals and outnumber the whites six to one, and apparently they are starving. Marlow wonders what prevented them from killing and eating the whites.

Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us . . . and have a good tuck in for once, amazes me now when I think of it. . . . No fear can stand up to hunger, no patience can wear it out, disgust simply does not exist where hunger is; and as to superstition, beliefs, and what you may call principles, they are less than chaff in a breeze. . . . And these chaps, too, had no earthly reason for any kind of scruple. Restraint! I would just as soon have expected restraint from a hyena prowling amongst the corpses of a battlefield. But there was the fact facing me. (75-6; pt. 2)

Such "restraint" in "uncivilized" men who do not have a "surface truth" of steampipes and steering to rely on undermines Marlow's assertions about restraint.

Similarly Kurtz's complete *lack* of restraint--the severed heads on spikes, having himself treated like a god, "certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" (86; pt. 2)--contradicts Marlow's ideas. And the issue is further clouded by the fact that Marlow praises Kurtz:

He was a remarkable man. After all, this ["The horror!"] was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth. (113; pt. 3)

And it is, of course, characteristic of the problems expressed on the metaphysical level that Marlow both contradicts and reaffirms this opinion of Kurtz several times throughout the story. Although Marlow finds Kurtz, he clearly does not find a resolution to the metaphysical problems raised by his physical quest. Rather, the metaphysical quest only leads to greater confusion and darkness.

Interestingly enough, Marlow seems at times to disparage this metaphysical side of the plot in favour of the physical. Immediately before the following quotation, he has gone on at length about the complexity of Kurtz's character. He waxes eloquent over this soul which both loves and loathes "the mysteries it had penetrated", capable of "noble and lofty expression" and at the same time "avid of lying fame, of sham distinction" (110; pt. 3), only to declare:

But I had not much time to give him, because I was helping the engine-driver to take to pieces the leaky cylinders, to straighten a bent connecting-rod. . . . I lived in an infernal mess of rust, filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet drills. (111; pt. 3)

Here, Marlow literally does not have time for the great moral struggles (metaphysics) because he has got to keep the boat afloat (physics). With his detailed list of concrete objects--filings, nuts, bolts, spanners, hammers, ratchet drills--Marlow sets the gritty physical realities of the voyage above Kurtz's momentous metaphysical struggle. Marlow's metaphysical quest cannot proceed if he physically ends up on the bottom of the river. This amounts, perhaps, to an expression, in Marlow's terms, of the main idea of chapter I: however powerful the thematics of a story may be, they are yet dependent on its action.

To summarise this analysis of the action, then, *Heart of Darkness* tells the story of the protagonist Marlow's search for Kurtz. Nevertheless the action contains three active problems. The first of these--how to find work--forms the beginning of the plot and is resolved relatively early. However, it leads on to the other physical search for Kurtz and the metaphysical search for answers and for relief from the darkness oppressing Marlow. The end of the action is Marlow's return to Europe. The plot itself is essentially dramatic, with the clearly identifiable Aristotelian elements, complication, denouement, reversal, and climax.

Unity of Effect

The unified action described above accounts for the greater part of *Heart of Darkness*. And yet, as with *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the remaining segments of the tale play considerable roles. I have identified these other two segments as Marlow's commentary and narrative or descriptive passages extraneous to the plot. They are unified with the main action through unity of effect. This can be defined as the unity arising from all parts of the story functioning to re-create in the reader the emotional effect of the ordeal on Marlow.

Hewitt has observed that "in fact, the story is primarily concerned with the effect of the country and of Kurtz on Marlow" (18). Indeed, Marlow himself says the same thing, providing the key to this notion of unity in his "prologue" aboard the *Nellie*. It is worth quoting a second time in this context:

To understand *the effect* of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up the river to the place where I first met the poor chap." (32; pt. 1; emphasis added)

Marlow is not only going to relate the events that happened to him but seek to *transmit his feelings* about them, "the effect" that is, as completely as possible.

In his Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*, Conrad sets out this conception as the aim of his fiction:

[Fiction] must be . . . the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power. . . creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. Such an appeal, to be effective, must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. . . . And the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. (xlviix-ix)

In other words, the goal of fiction ("its high desire") is to affect the reader's emotions. It achieves this goal by appealing "through the senses". This is remarkably close to Tolstoy's definition of art:

A boy having experienced, let us say, fear on encountering a wolf, relates that encounter, and in order to evoke in others the feeling he has experienced, describes himself, his condition before the encounter, the surroundings, the wood, his own light-heartedness, and the wolf's appearance, its movements . . . and so forth. (122; emphasis added)

In *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad aims not just to relate the action of Marlow's journey nor to reflect on its significance, but to evoke the feeling of "the encounter with the wolf", as it were. Thus, he, or Marlow at any rate, must render the sights and sounds--the "images" of the trip so as to make his audience see and hear, indeed experience the journey for themselves as far as possible.

The recreation of the effect of the journey, then, is the means by which all elements of *Heart of Darkness* are unified. The story's structure might resemble the parts of a wheel. The unified action described above

is the hub, the commentary and descriptive episodes are the spokes which are attached to it as well as radiating out from it, and the aim of re-creating the experience is the rim binding the whole together.

In the next two sections of the chapter I shall examine how thought and the descriptive episodes work to achieve this unity of effect.

Thought

The passages of Marlow's discursive commentary are linked to the hub of the plot in the first place through explicit reference to the action. (This is quite different from Kundera's novel, in which the connections between the action and abstract thought sometimes remain obscure for many pages.) For instance, Marlow's abstract thoughts about "surface truth" quoted above are obviously comments on the meaning of the wild dancing he witnessed on the trip upriver--an event which he has just narrated (68-9; pt. 2). These links come very naturally because Conrad has made his narrator a contemplative man--story-teller and thinker in one.

Nevertheless, the sheer length of some of Marlow's commentary and its high degree of abstraction might threaten, at times, to divorce it from the action or to make of the action, in Kundera's phrase, "the mere novelised illustration of one grand idea" (Art 78). Conrad deals with this danger to unity by constantly emphasizing Marlow's fictionality and by undermining

the reliability and even intelligibility of his comments.

For instance, immediately after the very concrete scene in which the helmsman is killed, Marlow interrupts the action to say how disappointed he was at the thought that Kurtz was surely dead by now. Then he strays from the story altogether and begins to reflect on Kurtz, whom, in the chronological order of events, he has not yet met. He concludes his discourse with some rather high-flown language:

The point was in his [i.e. Kurtz's] being a gifted creature, and that of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words--the gift of expression, the bewildering, the illuminating, the most exalted and the most contemptible, the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness. (83; pt. 2)

As if suddenly aware that this may have become too abstract and philosophical for his listeners, Marlow now jumps straight back to his narrative, to a concrete detail: "The other shoe went flying unto the devil-god of that river" (83; pt. 2)--only to move almost immediately back into the abstract as he gropes again for what it was that Kurtz meant to him. At this point his listeners become restless, which forces Marlow to break out of story-telling altogether:

". . . Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody? Absurd? Well, absurd. Good Lord! mustn't a man ever--Here, give me some tobacco." There was a pause of profound stillness, then a match flared, and Marlow's lean face appeared, worn, hollow, with downward folds and dropped eyelids. (83; pt. 2)

At this point Conrad has ceased trying to disguise the seam between plot and thought. In fact he calls attention to it by having Marlow's listeners fidget and then having Marlow break off his reminiscence altogether as if irritated or embarrassed, at which point the story's first narrator takes over and describes *Marlow*. Thus, the reader is reminded, through the huffs and puffs of Marlow's comrades, that Marlow the commentator is himself an actor in an action. This, in turn, works to unify comment and narrative.

For the same reasons, the reliability of Marlow's comments are continually undermined. His thoughts and judgments are contradictory at best, if not, at times, incomprehensible.⁹ Thus, they cannot be read as the keys to the meaning of the action. They do not stand above it but remain as ambiguous as the action itself. Marlow's judgments of Kurtz are the handiest example. They are sometimes contemptuous, "He was very little more than a voice" (84; pt. 2); sometimes sarcastic, "'My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my--' everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter" (85; pt. 2); and sometimes adulatory, "Better his cry--much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory, paid for by innumerable

⁹ For a typical example of the numerous explanations of Marlow's verbal obscurity in terms of a supposed "extra-linguistic" nature of his subject, see Brooks 238-63.

defeats. . . . But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last" (113; pt. 3). The reader is left not really knowing what Marlow finally thinks of Kurtz, because, obviously, Marlow himself does not know. He says only, "You see, I can't choose" (87; pt. 2). Clearly, Marlow is not an "omniscient" narrator in any sense. He is not presenting deliberated, final judgments but groping, as he tells the story, for its significance.

It would be difficult to believe that Conrad was unaware of these contradictions; like the dualities noted in the *Knight's Tale*, they are deliberate. They unify the text by allowing Marlow's thought no higher status than that of his narrative.

This deliberate undermining of the reliability of a character's thought is a means of preventing discursive comment from being interpreted as the author's own opinions and thereby of preserving the fictional integrity of the work. It is a technique not by any means exclusive to Conrad. Dostoyevsky, for example, wrote of the character Father Zosima from *The Brothers Karamazov*:

It's obvious that many of Elder Zosima's teachings (or better to say the manner of their expression) belongs to his personage, that is, to the artistic depiction of it. Although I quite share the ideas that he expresses, if I personally were expressing them, *on my own behalf*, I would express them in different form and in a different language. He, however, *could not* have expressed himself in either a language or a *spirit* other than the one I gave him. Otherwise an artistic personage wouldn't be created. (*Letters* 130-1)

Similarly, Kundera asserts:

The moment it becomes part of a novel, reflection changes its essence. Outside the novel, we're in the realm of affirmation: everyone is sure of his statements. . . . Within the universe of the novel, however, no one affirms: it is the realm of play and of hypotheses. In the novel, then, reflection is essentially inquiring, hypothetical. (Art 78)

And Koff finds Chaucer working in the same way in the *Canterbury Tales*:

Chaucer is forever giving up his magical omniscience . . . and providing a way for all performers, public and private--all readers--to give up the power they may claim for themselves to make the narrative mean in a certain way. (2)

In fact, the unreliability of Marlow's comments could be read as a modern application of Aristotle's dictum that "the poet himself should speak as little as possible, since when he does so he is not engaging in mimesis" (59; ch. 24). Thus, despite its lack of narrative content, Marlow's commentary remains as relative and fictional as the rest of the work, and this helps to unify it.

Further, the confusion evident in Marlow's thoughts provides further unity of effect, since, regardless of what Marlow may intend them to do, they do not at all function to illuminate meaning but primarily to convey his confused state of mind. It has already been shown that Marlow's passages of thought are frequently vague, confusing, and contradictory. Taken together they do not present any consistent or even effable conclusions; rather they give the

impression of a great fumbling in the dark, of a spiritual gloom in which it is *impossible* to make any coherent sense out of the experiences narrated. This is, of course, exactly the emotional and psychological state that the experience of the journey created in Marlow. Two quotations from the story should suffice to support this assertion. As early as his visit to the Company's headquarters, Marlow says:

There was something ominous in the atmosphere. It was just as though I had been let into some conspiracy--I don't know--something not quite right; and I was glad to get out. (36; pt. 1)

Later, sailing on the ship along the African coast he declares: "The general sense of vague and oppressive wonder grew upon me" (41; pt. 1).

It is just this grave and oppressive sense of wonder that Marlow's commentary transmits to the reader. If readers find Marlow's comments contradictory, vague, and generally not very illuminating, this is exactly the effect that the experience in Africa created in Marlow's mind. It is the effect of the ordeal *on thought* that readers re-experience in the thought passages. It is obviously not the case that Conrad was incapable of writing clearer thought segments, but that to do so would have run counter to his aim of re-creating in the reader's mind the darkness and confusion tormenting Marlow. In this way Marlow's thought contributes to unity of effect.

Descriptive Episodes

Action and thought have now been discussed. The remaining means of expression is the descriptive episodes lying outside the cause-and-effect sequence. These actually can be divided into passages which are mainly descriptive and those which are mainly narrative.¹⁰ For the sake of convenience I refer to both of these simply as "descriptive episodes" because they function in *Heart of Darkness* in essentially the same way.

Throughout the tale Marlow relates and describes things in the most intense, sensory detail that have no bearing on the action.¹¹ The vivid images they create in the reader's mind give them nevertheless exceptional emphasis.¹² It is precisely in the descriptive episodes that unity of effect becomes most apparent, for these frequently have no other function in the story than that of rendering the effect of Marlow's experience.

Of course each of the descriptive episodes could be said to belong to the story simply by being part of Marlow's intention to show "how I got out there" (32; pt. 1). They all depict things he saw or experienced in the various stages of his journey. However, this is

¹⁰ See Todorov's parallel division of episodes into the "static" and "dynamic" (220); and Lubbock's "picture" and "drama" (269-70).

¹¹ See, for example, the episodes on pages 34-5, 39, 41-2, 43-4, 48, and 52.

¹² For an enlightening discussion of the impact of the image as such, see Tarkovsky 22-7, 47, and 111.

not enough of a connection to create unity. As Aristotle pointed out:

A plot-structure does not possess unity (as some believe) by virtue of centring on an individual. For just as a particular thing may have many random properties, some of which do not combine to make a single entity, so a particular character may perform many actions which do not yield a single "action". (40; ch. 8)

In other words, the descriptive episodes do *not* make a unified whole simply because they come from Marlow. They must have a further aim or function in common.

For instance, one early episode is Marlow's visit to the Company offices on the Continent. It is described in minute detail. Indeed, Conrad devotes two distinct scenes to it: the first, the two knitting women in the outer room (36-7; pt. 1), and the second, the interview with the doctor (37-8; pt. 1). The relevance of the first scene might be explained as symbolical. The image of the two women endlessly knitting black wool "guarding the door of Darkness" (37; pt. 1) has rather obvious mythic overtones. It is a symbol of fate, as Marlow himself recognises, and is thereby linked thematically to the story.

However, the episode with the doctor cannot be explained through symbolism. Marlow begins with the man's physical description: "He was shabby and careless, with ink-stains on the sleeves of his jacket, and his cravat was large and billowy, under a chin shaped like the toe of an old boot" (37; pt. 1). Then follows a bizarre dialogue with Marlow in which the

doctor asks to measure Marlow's head. This too is recorded in detail.

This episode and especially the careful description is not an indispensable part of the plot. How, then, does it function within the story as a unified whole? Of course it may characterise the general attitude of the Company as well as prefigure the heartlessness Marlow is shortly to encounter in Africa. But here again such an explanation does not account for the sheer amount of detail devoted to the doctor's physical appearance. Obviously, for Marlow's purposes, this description is important in itself. It is re-creating "the moral and emotional atmosphere of the place and time" or, in Marlow's simpler phrase, "the effect of it on me".

Another example is the long passage about the boiler-maker whom Marlow meets at the Central Station:

He was a lank, bony, yellow-faced man, with big intense eyes. His aspect was worried, and his head was as bald as the palm of my hand; but his hair in falling seemed to have stuck to his chin, and had prospered in the new locality, for his beard hung down to his waist. He was a widower with six young children (he had left them in charge of a sister of his to come out there), and the passion of his life was pigeon-flying. . . . He would rave about pigeons. After work hours he used sometimes to come over from his hut for a talk about his children and his pigeons; at work, when he had to crawl in the mud under the bottom of the steamboat, he would tie up that beard of his in a kind of white serviette he brought for the purpose. It had loops to go over his ears. In the evening he could be seen squatted on the bank rinsing that wrapper in the creek with great care, then spreading it solemnly on a bush to dry. (60; pt. 1)

Clearly, the boiler-maker does not advance the action in any way; if anything he retards it. Neither is such a minute description of him connected to the story through theme, for it reveals little about existence or evil or the heart of darkness, little about work and restraint. One could perhaps attach some symbolic value to the white napkin--the futility of genteel affectation in the jungle or trying to make things "white" in the Congo and so forth, and there is no need to rule out the possibility that the image does have some such resonance. Yet the tone of the passage is gentle, not mocking or ironic; after all, Marlow likes the man. Furthermore such an explanation assumes that the purpose of description is to illustrate "meaning"--an assumption which Mieke Bal, for instance, has vigorously challenged (109-45).

In any case, calling the napkin a symbol does nothing to explain the length or detail of description in the passage. It does not account for the attention paid to the boiler-maker's appearance, his family, and his pigeon flying, or the fact that the napkin had earloops. If Conrad did indeed believe that "every word set on paper must carry the story forward" why are these details important enough to be included?

They are not perfunctory, novelistic ballast, not "filler". They are in fact essential to a re-creation of the experience. Without this re-creation the goal of the story--"to reach the responsive emotions"--could not be realised. It is precisely the oddity, the

irrelevance of details such as pigeons and earloops that transmit the absurdity, the mundanity and the sense of extreme alienation from ordinary, European life that Marlow feels. The descriptive episodes do this much more forcefully than his thought or a bare narrative ever could. They reveal, in Conrad's phrase, "the stress and passion of each convincing moment" ("Narcissus", Preface xlix).

As a final example consider Marlow's description of the voyage down the African coast:

Once, I remember, we came upon a man-of-war anchored off the coast. There wasn't even a shed there, and she was shelling the bush. It appears the French had one of their wars going on thereabouts. Her ensign dropped limp like a rag; the muzzles of the long six-inch guns stuck out all over the low hull; the greasy, slimy swell swung her up lazily and let her down, swaying her thin masts. . . . There she was . . . firing into a continent. Pop[,] would go one of the six-inch guns; a small flame would dart and vanish, a little white smoke would disappear, a tiny projectile would give a feeble screech--and nothing happened. . . . There was a touch of insanity in the proceeding, a sense of lugubrious drollery in the sight. . . . We gave her her letters (I heard the men in that lonely ship were dying of fever at the rate of three a-day) and went on. (40-1; pt. 1)

Once again it is the sensory details--the pop of the gun, the "little white smoke", the "feeble screech", and the soldiers dying three a day which convey the hopelessness, the futility, and sadness of the situation far more than Marlow's abstract generalizations: "the touch of insanity", and the "lugubrious drollery". The details enable readers to feel these themselves.

The descriptive episodes are thus unified with the action in that all work to convey a total effect, the ultimate aim of which is to reach the "responsive emotions" of the reader. Naturally, individual, concrete details, e.g. earloops, are not essential to the success or failure of the tale in the way individual events of the plot-structure are. Rather it is the steady build-up of these details, their cumulative effect on the senses, that makes the reader seem to "see and hear" the action almost as if he or she were present in it.

To summarise the discussion of unity in *Heart of Darkness*, then: the novel as a whole is unified by its aim to re-create the effect of the experience for the reader. This aim unites the three different parts of the book: plot, thought, and descriptive episode.

The heart of this structure is the strong, unified action. Marlow is the protagonist and his super-objective is to reach the Inner Station, which in the course of the story takes on a metaphysical dimension. The plot-structure has a clear beginning--Marlow out of a job and looking for work--a middle--the journey up the river--and an end--Marlow's collapse after reaching the Inner Station.

In the long passages of thought, Marlow makes his obscure and confusing judgments about Kurtz and the meaning behind his story. These both mirror and help to infect the reader with Marlow's own confusion and

uncertainty, that is, with the effect of the experiences on his mind. Likewise the descriptive episodes are unified to the rest of the story by their re-creation, through vivid sensory detail, of the strange world and circumstances in which the action takes place.

Attached to this structure is the interview with the Intended. It is extraneous, though not completely unrelated, to any of Marlow's active problems. It is not part of the unified action of the plot, and it does not function in the same way as the other extra-plot episodes due to its length and position in the book. It has a thematic connection to the main action only to the limited extent that "lying" is a theme. Neither could it be considered a digression in Kundera's sense of abandoning the story for a moment in order to go at the theme directly, for it neither goes at the story's themes nor returns to the story. It happens after the story is over. Consequently, it seems as if it ought to make some type of concluding comment on the action. Yet it does not. Instead it is about Marlow's character and the Intended's and about lying.

Neither can I find in it any unity of effect. It is not vague, confusing, or ambiguous as the rest of the story is. On the contrary the judgments and significance of the action are painfully clear: the Intended is hopelessly (and willingly) deluded as to Kurtz's character, and Marlow lies to her about Kurtz's death to avoid the embarrassment and pain of

disillusioning her. Thus, it breaks sharply with the tone of the rest of the book. It could be read as a "postscript" or epilogue, but in terms of structure it is more accurately a new action with the beginnings of a new plot, characters, and themes.

To conclude, in *Heart of Darkness*, as in the other stories considered earlier, action is still the most important element, the hub of the total structure. Indeed, the action would be strong enough to stand by itself; the plot's ironic reversal alone is no doubt capable of generating release. And while Conrad does indeed seek to release a flood of powerful emotions, or, as he puts it, to reach "the secret spring of responsive emotions", yet he does so not through a single cathartic shock brought on through the dramatic resolution of an active problem, but rather through a complete and convincing reproduction of an entire experience. The experience itself is important, indeed, is the goal. Thus, in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow is free to express whatever thoughts and details will most powerfully render the experience's effect.

To employ a different metaphor, the action is a base of operations for Marlow the story-teller. He makes plenty of sorties from this base out into thought, description, and episode, yet he always returns to it, since his thought and descriptions have little impact in isolation from the events of the plot.

As this discussion of unity in both *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Heart of Darkness* has shown, the

unified action can serve the same function for the story-reader. Once the action and its structure have been grasped, they provide a coherent, clearly delineated base of operations. The tasks of analysing the rest of the elements in the story and of accounting for how they have been unified can proceed from this base.

Conclusion

As I first stated in the introduction, to understand a story would mean, ideally, knowing all its elements and how they function to form a whole. The concept of the unified action provides a key to three of the most important elements of the story: plot-structure, theme, and unity. The first of these, plot-structure, is most important. To understand a story we must comprehend its plot above all. To comprehend the plot-structure of a story means to know what the main problem is, who the protagonist is, and what it is that he or she actively wants. It means to know what the resolution of the problem is and especially how this resolution is brought to pass.

Following Aristotle's lead, I have approached unified action in the simple yet very functional terms of beginning, middle, and end. Action begins with the introduction of an active problem through some sort of disturbance (e.g. a Green Knight). The attempts of the protagonist to solve the active problem constitute the action's middle, and the resolution of the problem brings the action to an end. Thus, action is the answer to perhaps the most fundamental question one can ask about a story: What is this story about?

Indeed, it is the answer to this ambiguous question in both its senses; it is both what a story

tells and what it has to say or, more often, what it has to ask. Theme, that is, what the story has to ask, the ideas that it explores, results from the active problem posed by the disturbance. Indeed, as the discussion in chapter I demonstrated, the range and direction of a story's themes are determined to a considerable extent by the conditions governing its situation. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that theme equals the sum of situation and active problem. In this way, understanding the plot-structure of a story means understanding its themes.

The unified action also provides a basis from which the entire structure of a long and complex story can be grasped. If we can identify the action, we can determine what parts of a story function within that action and which parts have functions elsewhere. This makes analysis of the story's total structure much easier and the principle(s) upon which it is unified much clearer.

Genette has sensibly warned against the temptation "to seek unity at any price and in that way to force the work's coherence" (266). Action provides a sound and sensible foundation for an unforced understanding of unity because it is undeniably unified through the plot structure. Aristotle took relevance to the action as the acid test for every episode's inclusion or exclusion from a story. If many authors, such as Kundera and Conrad, have found other, less exclusionary ways of unifying stories, action has nevertheless

tended to remain at the centre as a hub onto which episodes are fastened and upon which the story as a whole turns. It is in this sense that action can also be called the "soul" of a story.

The importance of the models of action and plot-structure as outlined in this thesis are their applications to literary study in general. The plot-structure of many works is still frequently neglected as if it were too obvious to bear much thought or perhaps too obvious to say much about. I have tried to show, on the contrary, how plot-structure is a rather complex subject, worthy of the most careful study in itself. In addition, an accurate grasp of a story's themes is virtually impossible without a clear understanding of the structure of the story's action. Although much work in this area remains to be done, the analysis of action clearly has the potential for providing a sophisticated and effective method or "approach" to stories in teaching and research.

Of course, such an approach would not have unlimited relevance to *all* fiction. The so-called "minimalist" American fiction of the 1980s, and the older "slice-of-life" genre, to name but two instances, characteristically contain slight action if they contain an action at all. In such cases a study based on action and plot-structure is not likely to yield many insights. Still, if the relevance of action as the basis for a critical approach is doubtful in the case of stories that eschew the "narrative core" of

action, so too is the extent to which fiction without action can be called a story. As I stated in my introduction, the rather unassuming model of action established in this thesis cannot serve as a grand, general theory of literature but applies, rather, to those stories in which action and plot play the leading roles.

A more difficult and, indeed, fundamental problem with the concept of action is the structure of events--the subject of chapter II. According to Aristotle, events must be structured so as to exclude non-human causes, such as chance, if the plot is to achieve the greatest effects of which it is capable. In Aristotle's view, as Halliwell explains, "it is the total coherence of a work . . . which will be disturbed by even a single chance event within the sequence of action" (*Aristotle's* 210).

The discussion has shown that coherence is indeed necessary so that the audience can perceive the protagonist's own fallibility in bringing about the transformation of fortune. Yet, as any number of plot-structures demonstrate, coherence does not mandate the utter exclusion of the non-human cause from the action. An action with non-humanly caused events can be coherent enough to bring about the release of powerful emotions as long as the essential fallibility of the protagonist is maintained. Utter lucidity is not an end in itself; rather, a certain degree of lucidity is necessary to create the conditions for fallibility. It

is only when the use of non-human causes eliminates these conditions that the ability to release is at risk.

My discussion of the causality problem above is an attempt to forge a kind of compromise between the human and non-human poles of causality in plot-structure by centring on fallibility. Yet this compromise leaves many of the most fundamental questions about action unanswered. The problem of causality raises questions which lie at the heart of plot-construction and perhaps even of story-telling itself--the "constitutive questions" of fiction according to Kundera (*Art* 58): What are the causes of action? What makes the revelation or concealment of causality emotionally compelling and why? In what precisely does the power of action to cause the release of emotions lie? To conclude, I would like to indicate a few of the directions which further research into these questions might take.

I have claimed that the great advantage of lucidity is that it allows for fallibility. However, Aristotle suggested, with characteristic insight, that the power of the lucid, unified action came precisely from the fact that it was *more* coherent, *more* lucid, and therefore more significant than the unorganised commotion of everyday life (Halliwell, *Commentary* 107). In other words, the lucid plot-structure seems to possess remarkable force itself quite apart from fallibility.

To return briefly to the *Reeve's Tale* for an illustration, it is undeniably much funnier that the Miller's wife gets in bed with John because he moved the cradle to the foot of his bed than it would be if she got into the wrong bed accidentally, even though in either case she would still bring her fate down on herself. Consequently, fallibility cannot be the decisive factor here. On the contrary, the humour seems to lie in the reader's very perception and understanding of the connections to previous events. The reader "sees" John moving the cradle, "sees" the wife groping for it and finding it at the foot of the wrong bed, and comprehends why she then gets into the wrong bed. For some reason we find this funny in a way we would not have had she made the mistake just by chance. Thus, we are left with the question: What is so funny about seeing connections?

The explanations by Lessing and Dürrenmatt which I cited earlier are enlightening but still incomplete. They do not fully explain the effect of the lucid plot-structure on our emotions. Lessing and Dürrenmatt claimed that lucidity of plot-structure allows the members of the audience to "identify", to see how the same fate could befall them, and certainly we are able to identify, to a degree, with the acts of John and Alayn and the miller's wife. Nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that a reader, especially a modern reader, of the *Reeve's Tale* could really feel that the same things might well happen to him or her. Considered

soberly, the whole action seems ludicrous and virtually impossible. Yet the modern reader still laughs. It seems equally unlikely that a production of *Oedipus the King* grips modern spectators because they feel that the same misfortunes might actually befall themselves. Thus, the appeal of the completely lucid plot-structure must go beyond the process of audience affinity with the characters and events portrayed.

Aristotle, on the other hand, accounts for the affinity of the audience with the characters by asserting that the extent of its emotional response to the fate of the protagonist depends on his or her ethical status (44-5; ch. 13). But is it not true that, in fact, we identify with the acts and objectives of characters both wicked and good, with an Iago or Raskolnikov just as much as with an Odysseus or Iphigenia? The sympathy of the audience with the plight of the characters seems to have more to do with the situations in which they act and with the fact *that* they act than with their qualities. But again: *Why* is this so? What is it that makes action itself compelling?

As if this did not make the nature of action mysterious enough, *not* being able to make sense of events also releases the emotions. For example, the plot-structure of O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" releases emotions through the very opposite of lucidity, that is, through ambiguity and inexplicability--The Misfit coming out of nowhere

precisely at the time and place of the family's accident. Here, the reader perceives no connection between the events and cannot explain why things have happened in just this way. The cause of the crisis is mysterious, but it still powerfully affects the emotions. One has to conclude, then, that both lucidity *and* obscurity of cause possess the capability of releasing powerful emotions. This paradox certainly calls for further investigation.¹

Equally challenging and unexplored is the question of the role of action in stories outside the dominant dramatic-type plot-structure, that is, in stories which do not have the release of emotions as their primary purpose. How does action function in fables? How does it function in stories which lie somewhere between the dramatic plot-structure and the plot-structure of the fable such as, for instance, "The Happy Man's Shirt" or Kafka's short *Erzählungen* or Borges's fictions?

Finally there is the question of action's staying power itself. Why has plot survived at all? Indeed why, after so many centuries, is the dramatic, action-based plot-structure still so enormously popular? That it is enormously popular is evidenced, for instance, by the massive annual trade in "formula" fiction: the detective, spy, western, and romance paperbacks. Whatever their literary shortcomings may be, they do contain dramatic actions full of suspense, which finds

¹ For a short but cogent speculation on this subject, see Kundera's "Beyond Causality" (Art 57-9).

considerable approval from the public. Even more massive, of course, is the film industry, which seems to have virtually taken over the job of story-telling in the modern world. That so many films should contain what are essentially variations on the same type of plot-structures described by Aristotle testifies again to a very deep and abiding appeal of the unified action.

Even in the realm of the "literary" story, even after Dada, after the theatre of the absurd, after metafiction, after the vast history of western story-telling would seem to have exhausted plot's every possibility, plot and action are still alive and well in writers as conscious of that history and their own place in it as Milan Kundera. Even in the works of the most "intellectual" writers action continues to fascinate, excite, and perplex.

In this light it is no wonder that action is often said to be connected on a deep and perhaps even primal level with needs or desires in the human psyche. However, such connections still exist largely in the realm of speculation. Here, above all, more research needs to be done. Is the appeal of the unified action indeed "timeless"? Is it indeed universal, that is, trans-cultural? Does something like Aristotle's unified action exist in non-Western story-telling traditions? Propp provided a morphology of Russian folktales, but many more such studies would be needed, particularly in the non-Western traditions, before any

serious discussion of such topics as universality can begin.

It is clear that the answers to these questions will have to be sought in the sciences that study human beings--above all psychology, history, and anthropology--as well as in action-based analysis of story structure itself.² A focus on action itself in isolation from the response of the reader, while perhaps necessary in the analytical stage of study, as in this thesis, is ultimately artificial and rather limiting. However, further combined study in these areas promises new and extremely valuable insights into the nature of the story.

² For interesting work on action incorporating anthropological and psychological findings see Lapan and Bruner respectively.

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