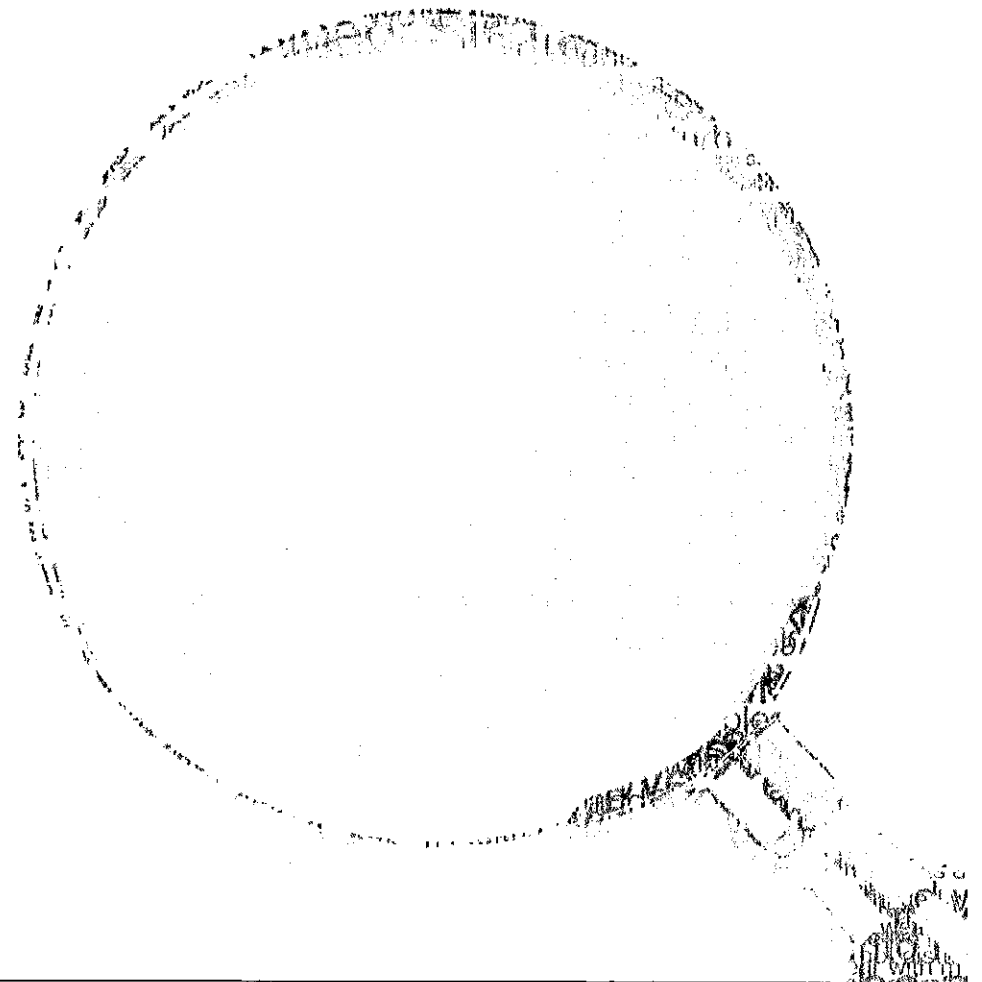


Section 1

Ideas about narrative



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This section contains extracts that explore some of the methods writers use to construct stories. Stories, for many, are seen as being of fundamental importance to human life. Booker begins to explore the idea that there are commonly recurring story types that can be traced throughout all literature. David Lodge has written extensively about narrative, and here there are extracts related to how writers start and end their narratives, how narratives are structured and told, and how time and setting are used within stories. For many readers the characters are the most important and memorable aspect of a story and there are some ideas here about that crucial element of characterisation. In focusing on the story and its structure, some writers also focus on the gaps in the narrative, the parts of the story that are not told. Ideas about narrative gaps are specifically included here as they can be very fruitful areas of investigation and exploration, especially for those students interested in producing re-creative pieces, which often focus on what is silent, missing or not explained in the text.

1.1 Story types

Taken from *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, by C. Brooker:

Imagine we are about to be plunged into a story – any story in the world. A curtain rises on a stage. A cinema darkens. We turn to the first paragraph of a novel. A narrator utters the age-old formula ‘Once upon a time ...’

On the face of it, so limitless is the human imagination and so boundless the realm at the storyteller’s command, we might think that literally anything could happen next. But in fact there are certain things we can be pretty sure we know about our story even before it begins.

For a start, it is likely that the story will have a hero, or a heroine, or both: a central figure, or figures, on whose fate our interest in the story ultimately rests; someone with whom, as we say, we can identify.

We are introduced to our hero or heroine in an imaginary world. Briefly or at length, the general scene is set. The purpose of the formula ‘Once upon a time ...’, whether the storyteller uses it explicitly or not, is to take us out of our present place and time into that imaginary realm where the story is to unfold, and to introduce us to the central figure with whom we are to identify.

Then something happens: some event or encounter which precipitates the story’s action, giving it a focus. In fact, the opening of the story is governed by a kind of double formula: ‘Once upon a time there was such and such a person, living in such and such place ... then, one day, something happened’.

We are introduced to a little boy called Aladdin, who lives in a city in China ... then one day a Sorcerer arrives, and leads him out of the city to a mysterious underground cave. We meet a Scottish general, Macbeth, who has just won a great victory over his country's enemies ... then, on his way home, he encounters the mysterious witches. We meet a girl called Alice, wondering how to amuse herself in the summer heat ... then suddenly she sees a White Rabbit running past, and vanishing down a mysterious hole. We see the great detective Sherlock Holmes sitting in his Baker Street lodgings ... then there is a knock at the door, and a visitor enters to present him with his next case.

This event or summons provides the 'Call' which will lead the hero or heroine out of their initial state into a series of adventures or experiences which, to a greater or lesser extent, will transform their lives.

The next thing of which we can be sure is that the action which the hero or heroine are being drawn into will involve conflict and uncertainty, because without some measure of both there cannot be a story. Where there is a hero there may also be a villain (on some occasions, indeed, the hero himself may be the villain). But even if the characters in the story are not necessarily contrasted in such black-and-white terms as 'goodies' and 'baddies', it is likely that some will be on the side of the hero or heroine, as friends and allies, while others will be out to oppose them.

Finally, we shall sense that the impetus of the story is carrying it towards some kind of resolution. Every story which is complete, and not just a fragmentary string of episodes and impressions, must work up to a climax, where conflict and uncertainty are usually at their most extreme. This then leads to a resolution of all that has gone before, bringing the story to its ending. And here we see how every story, however mildly or emphatically, has in fact been leading its central figure or figures in one of two directions. Either they end, as we say, happily, with a sense of liberation, fulfilment and completion. Or they end unhappily, in some form of discomfiture, frustration or death.

To say that stories either have happy or unhappy endings may seem such a commonplace that one almost hesitates to utter it. But it has to be said, simply because it is the most important single thing to be observed about stories. Around that one fact, and around what is necessary to bring a story to one type of ending or the other, revolves the whole of their extraordinary significance in our lives.

One of the few general texts ever to have been written on stories was Aristotle's *Poetics*, left unfinished well over 2000 years ago. It was Aristotle who first observed that a satisfactory story – a story which, as he put it, is a 'whole' – must have 'a beginning, a middle and an end'. And it was Aristotle who, in the context of the two main types of stage play, first explicitly drew attention to the two kinds of ending a story may lead up to.

On the one hand, as he put it in the *Poetics*, there are tragic stories. These are stories in which the hero or heroine's fortunes usually begin by rising, but eventually 'turn down' to disaster (the Greek word *catastrophe* means literally a 'down stroke', the downturn in the hero's fortunes at the end of a tragedy). On the other hand, there are, in the broadest sense, comedies: stories in which things initially seem to become more and more complicated for the hero or heroine, until they are entangled in a complete knot, from which there seems no escape. But eventually comes what Aristotle calls the *peripeteia* or 'reversal of fortune': the knot is miraculously unravelled (from which we get the French word *dénouement*, meaning literally an 'unknotting'). Hero, heroine or both together are liberated; and we and all the world can rejoice.

This division holds good over a much greater range of stories than might be implied just by the terms 'tragedy' and 'comedy'. Indeed, with qualifications, it remains true right across the domain of storytelling. The plot of a story is that which leads its hero or heroine either to a 'catastrophe' or an 'unknotting'; either to frustration or to liberation; either to death or to a renewal of life. And it might be thought that there are almost as many ways of describing these downward and upward paths as there are individual stories in the world. Yet the more carefully we look at the vast range of stories thrown up by the human imagination through the ages, the more clearly we may discern that there are certain continually recurring general shapes to stories, dictating the nature of the road which the hero or heroine may take to their ultimate destination.

Brooker, C. (2004) *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, London: Continuum, pp 17–19.

1.2 Structure

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

The structure of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character. The effects of a novel's structure, however, are experienced not in space but over time – often quite a long time. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, for instance, which Coleridge thought had one of the three greatest plots in literature (the other two were both plays, *Oedipus Rex* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*), runs to nearly 900 pages in the Penguin edition. It has 198 Chapters, divided into eighteen Books, the first six of which are set in the country, the next six on the road, and the final six in London. Exactly in the middle of the novel most of the major characters pass through the same inn, but without meeting in combinations which would bring the story to a premature conclusion. The novel is packed with surprises, enigmas and suspense, and ends with a classic Reversal and Discovery.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, p 216.

1.3 Beginnings

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

For the reader, however, the novel always begins with that opening sentence (which may not, of course, be the first sentence the novelist originally wrote). And then the next sentence, and then the sentence after that ... When does the beginning of a novel end, is another difficult question to answer. Is it the first paragraph, the first few pages, or the first chapter? However one defines it, the beginning of a novel is a threshold, separating the real world we inhabit from the world the novelist has imagined. It should therefore, as the phrase goes, “draw us in”.

A novel may begin with a set-piece description of a landscape or townscape that is to be the primary setting of the story, the *mise-en-scène* as film criticism terms it: for example, the sombre description of Egdon Heath at the beginning of Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*, or E. M. Forster’s account of Chandrapore, in elegant, urbane guide-book prose, at the outset of *A Passage to India*. A novel may begin in the middle of a conversation, like Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust*, or Ivy Compton-Burnett’s idiosyncratic works. It may begin with an arresting self-introduction by the narrator, “Call me Ishmael” (Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*), or with a rude gesture at the literary tradition of autobiography: “... the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it” (J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*). A novelist may begin with a philosophical reflection – “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*), or pitch a character into extreme jeopardy with the very first sentence: “Hale knew they meant to murder him before he had been in Brighton three hours” (Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock*). Many novels begin with a “frame-story” which explains how the main story was discovered, or describes it being told to a fictional audience. In Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* an anonymous narrator describes Marlow relating his Congo experiences to a circle of friends sitting on the deck of a cruising yawl in the Thames estuary (“And this also,” Marlow begins, “has been one of the dark places of the earth”). Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* consists of a deceased woman’s memoir, which is read aloud to guests at a country-house party who have been entertaining themselves with ghost stories, and get, perhaps, more than they bargained for. Kingsley Amis begins his ghost story, *The Green Man*, with a witty pastiche of *The Good Food Guide*: “No sooner has one got over one’s surprise at finding a genuine coaching inn less than 40 miles from London – and 8 from the M1 – than one is marvelling at the quality of the equally English fare ...” Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller* begins, “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller*.” James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* begins in the middle of a sentence: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs.” The missing fragment concludes the book: “A way a lone a last a loved a long the” – thus returning us to the beginning again, like the recirculation of water in the environment, from river to sea to cloud to rain to river, and like the unending production of meaning in the reading of fiction.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, pp 4-5 and pp 7-8.

1.4 Endings

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

“Conclusions are the weak points of most authors,” George Eliot remarked, “but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation.” To Victorian novelists endings were apt to be particularly troublesome, because they were always under pressure from readers and publishers to provide a happy one. The last chapter was known in the trade as the “wind-up”, which Henry James sarcastically described as “a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks.” James himself pioneered the “open” ending characteristic of modern fiction, often stopping the novel in the middle of a conversation, leaving a phrase hanging resonantly, but ambiguously, in the air: “‘Then there we are,’ said Strether.” (*The Ambassadors*)

As Jane Austen pointed out in a metafictional aside in *Northanger Abbey*, a novelist cannot conceal the timing of the end of the story (as a dramatist or film-maker can, for instance) because of the tell tale compression of the pages. When John Fowles provides a mock-Victorian wind-up to *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (in which Charles settles down happily with Ernestina) we are not deceived, for a quarter of the book remains to be read. Going on with the story of Charles’s quest for Sarah, Fowles offers us two more alternative endings – one that ends happily for the hero, and the other unhappily. He invites us to choose between them, but tacitly encourages us to see the second as more authentic, not just because it is sadder, but because it is more open, with the sense of life going on into an uncertain future.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, p 224.

1.5 Time

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

The simplest way to tell a story, equally favoured by tribal bards and parents at bedtime, is to begin at the beginning, and go on until you reach the end, or your audience falls asleep. But even in antiquity, storytellers perceived the interesting effects that could be obtained by deviating from chronological order. The classical epic began *in medias res*, in the midst of the story. For example, the narrative of the *Odyssey* begins halfway through the hero’s hazardous voyage home from the Trojan War, loops back to describe his earlier adventures, then follows the story to its conclusion in Ithaca.

Through time-shift, narrative avoids presenting life as just one damn thing after another, and allows us to make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events. A shift of narrative focus back in time may change our interpretation of something which happened much later in the chronology of the story, but which we have already experienced

as readers of the text. This is a familiar device of cinema, the flashback. Film has more difficulty in accommodating the effect of “flashforward” – the anticipatory glimpse of what is going to happen in the future of the narrative, known to classical rhetoricians as “prolepsis”. This is because such information implies the existence of a narrator who knows the whole story, and films do not normally have narrators. It is significant that in this respect the film of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was much less complex and innovative than the novel on which it was based. The film told the story in straightforward chronological order, whereas the novel is remarkable for its fluid handling of time, ranging rapidly back and forward over the span of the action.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, pp 74–75.

1.6 Setting

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

The sense of place was a fairly late development in the history of prose fiction. As Mikhail Bakhtin observed, the cities of classical romance are interchangeable backcloths for the plot: Ephesus might as well be Corinth or Syracuse, for all we are told about them. The early English novelists were scarcely more specific about place. London in Defoe’s or Fielding’s novels, for instance, lacks the vivid visual detail of Dickens’s London. When Tom Jones arrives at the capital in search of his beloved Sophia, the narrator tells us that he

was an entire stranger in London; and as he happened to arrive first in a quarter of the town, the inhabitants of which have very little intercourse with the householders of Hanover or Grosvenor Square (for he entered through Gray’s Inn Lane) so he rambled about for some time, before he could even find his way to those happy mansions, where Fortune segregates from the vulgar those ... whose ancestors being born in better days, by sundry kinds of merit, have entailed riches and honour on their posterity.

London is described entirely in terms of the variations of class and status in its inhabitants, as interpreted by the author’s ironical vision. There is no attempt to make the reader “see” the city, or to describe its sensory impact on a young man up from the country for the first time. Compare Dickens’s description of Jacob’s Island in *Oliver Twist*:

To reach this place, the visitor has to penetrate through a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets, thronged by the roughest and poorest of the waterside people ... The cheapest and least delicate provisions are heaped in the shops; the coarsest and commonest articles of wearing apparel dangle at the salesman’s door, and stream from the house-parapet and windows ... he walks beneath tottering housefronts projecting over the pavement, dismantled walls that seem to totter as he passes, chimneys half-crushed, half-hesitating to fall, windows guarded by rusty iron bars that time and dirt have almost eaten away, every imaginable sign of desolation and neglect.

Tom Jones was published in 1749; *Oliver Twist* in 1838. What intervened was the Romantic movement, which pondered the effect of *milieu* on man, opened people's eyes to the sublime beauty of landscape and, in due course, to the grim symbolism of cityscapes in the Industrial Age.

Martin Amis is a late exponent of the Dickensian tradition of urban Gothic. His fascinated and appalled gaze at the post-industrial city mediates an apocalyptic vision of culture and society in a terminal state of decay. As with Dickens, his settings often seem more animated than his characters, as if the life has been drained out of people to re-emerge in a demonic, destructive form in things: streets, machines, gadgets.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, pp 57–58.

1.7 Narrators

Taken from *The Art of Fiction*, by D. Lodge:

Unreliable narrators are invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell. An unreliable “omniscient” narrator is almost a contradiction in terms, and could only occur in a very deviant, experimental text. Even a character-narrator cannot be a hundred per cent unreliable. If everything he or she says is palpably false, that only tells us what we know already, namely that a novel is a work of fiction. There must be some possibility of discriminating between truth and falsehood within the imagined world of the novel, as there is in the real world, for the story to engage our interest.

The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. This need not be a conscious, or mischievous, intention on their part. The narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel is not an evil man, but his life has been based on the suppression and evasion of the truth, about himself and about others. His narrative is a kind of confession, but it is riddled with devious self-justification and special pleading, and only at the very end does he arrive at an understanding of himself – too late to profit by it.

Lodge, D. (1992) *The Art of Fiction*, London: Penguin, pp 154–155.

1.8 Characterisation

Taken from *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, by H. Porter Abbott:

Ever since the distinction between *character* and *action* in narrative was first introduced over two thousand years ago, theorists have tended to give priority of importance to one or the other. For Aristotle, it was quite clear that the action (“the incidents of the story”) took precedence over character:

Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing.

For Leslie Stephen, writing in England at the end of the nineteenth century, the balance was just the reverse. The great object of narrative action was the revelation of character. Stephen was a man of his time and place, and became in 1881 the first editor of England's *Dictionary of National Biography*, whose founding was itself highly symptomatic of this shift in emphasis. The first of its kind, the DNB was the narrative equivalent of England's National Portrait Gallery, for in Stephen's words, a biography "should be a portrait as reveals the essence of character."

A third position is that character and action are inseparable. Stephen's contemporary, Henry James, argued that no one could learn the art of novel writing by learning first to make characters and second to devise the action. Characters and action were, finally, indistinguishable, "melting into each other at every breath":

What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? ... It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident I think it will be hard to say what it is. At the same time it is an expression of character.

It is hard to deny the logic of this. Insofar as the incidents involve people, how those incidents play out is driven by the nature of the people involved. Characters, to put this in narratological terms, have *agency*; they cause things to happen. Conversely, as these people drive the action, they necessarily reveal who they are in terms of their motives, their strength, weakness, trustworthiness, capacity to love, hate, cherish, adore, deplore, and so on. By their actions do we know them.

Porter Abbott, H. (2002) *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 123–124.

1.9 Flat and round characters

Taken from *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, by H. Porter Abbott:

E. M. Forster introduced the term *flat character* to refer to characters who have no hidden complexity. In this sense, they have no depth (hence the word "flat"). Frequently found in comedy, satire, and melodrama, flat characters are limited to a narrow range of predictable behaviors. Examples can be found throughout the novels of Dickens, flattened further by refrains (*motifs*) like "Barkis is willin" that sum the character up. The philosopher Henri Bergson speculated that we laugh at such characters because they represent a reduction

of the human to the mechanical. Whether he was right about this or not, such characters do seem to exist on the surface of the story, along with objects and machines. There are no mysterious gaps to fill since what you see is what you get. They declare themselves in their motifs, as if to say – to borrow a motif from Popeye the Sailor (another flat character) – “I yam what I yam.”

Forster’s counter term to flat characters was *round characters*. Round characters have varying degrees of depth and complexity and therefore, in Forster’s words, they “cannot be summed up in a single phrase”. In Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, for example, the round central character takes apart Popeye’s signature motif, “I yam what I yam,” using it to evoke his own conflicted relationship with his African-American cultural heritage, of which yams are both a powerful symbol and an actual component. The pun of “yam” and “I am” is in turn one small component in a complex web of conflicting ideas, feelings, and values out of which we, along with the Invisible Man, try to put together an understanding of his character. It is the interest of this sort of complexity that has led many critics to rank round characters above flat ones. And though flat characters can be awfully funny, and satire can provide focus and bite by reducing a target to a flat character, the complexity of round characters seems closer to the way people really are.

Porter Abbott, H. (2002) *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 126–127.

1.10 Narrative gaps

Taken from *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, by H. Porter Abbott:

Narratives by their nature are riddled with gaps. Even if we come as close as we humanly can to avoid underreading and overreading, we still have to fill things in if we are to make sense of the narratives we read or see.

That night we lay on the floor in the room and I listened to the silk-worms eating. The silk-worms fed in racks of mulberry leaves and all night you could hear them eating and a dropping sound in the leaves.

In these first two sentences of Hemingway’s short story “Now I Lay Me”, a number of gaps open up. Where are we? Why are we lying on the floor? What do silk-worms sound like when they eat? What is a “dropping sound”? Is it like the sound of rain? Why can’t or won’t the narrator shut out the sound of the silk-worms? If he (is it a he?) listens “all night”, why is he staying awake?

As we read, the narrative discourse gives us some guidance for filling in these gaps. We learn that the narrator is recalling a time when he was convalescing “seven miles behind the lines.” From a few historical markers and the fact that his orderly is an Italian who was conscripted when he returned home, we infer that these “lines” are the Italian front during World War I. We infer from the fact that they “were lying on blankets spread over straw,” that the narrator and his orderly are in a makeshift ward in a structure (a house? a barn?) appropriated for the purpose. But much of these inferences, insofar as we build them in our minds, are constructed from what we know or imagine of houses or barns in Italy in the second decade of the twentieth century. We never receive any more information on the sound of silk-worms eating (except that it is different from that of guns in the distance), so if this gap is going to be filled in, we must use what we know, or imagine, about the sounds of things dropping on leaves.

And why can't he sleep? We learn a reason for this in the next two sentences:

I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back.

This explains why he knows that the silk-worms feed all night. But it also helps us, by inference, to account for why he may listen to them obsessively – because they help block out the more distant sound of the guns. As for the specific nature of his wounds when he was “blown up”, this gap remains wide open. We do learn, with regard to the immediate impact of that event, that his soul went out of his body and then came back again, but for most of us we are again forced to do some filling in since few of us have had this experience.

The reading of narrative is a fine tissue of insertions like this that we make as we move from point to point. And though this can often lead to overreading, it also gives the experience of narrative much of its power. In other words, the energy narrative draws on is our own. Wolfgang Iser, who wrote at length about the gaps in narrative, put it this way: “it is only through inevitable omissions that a story gains its dynamism.” But it is also worth underscoring at this point that we have little clear understanding of what exactly the mind does when it reads. And if filling in gaps is one of the ways the mind makes narrative “dynamic”, another way is to limit this filling in – not to go too far. When Satan is described in *Paradise Lost*, rising from the burning lake in hell, Milton gives an indication of his immensity by strategically limiting the information he gives us:

Then with expanded wings he steers his flight

Aloft, incumbent on the dusky Air

That felt unusual weight (l, 225–7)

Had he told us that Satan was 100 feet in length, had a wingspan of 85 feet, and weighed roughly 8 tons, Milton would not have communicated the same sense of immensity that he does in these three lines. He gains by leaving out, by suggesting and not specifying. Satan does not fly, but “steers his flight”, like a ship; he is weighted with low ‘u’ sounds, “incumbent on the dusky Air”; and even the air, normally so unfazed by everything and anything, “felt unusual weight”. As in a bad dream, we don’t see but rather feel the satanic hugeness of this creature. Satan arouses awe to the degree that the reader does not fill in the descriptive details about him. So here is another interesting complication in the field of narrative. If narrative comes alive as we fill in its gaps, it also gains life by leaving some of them unfilled. In the art of narrative, less can be more.

Porter Abbott, H. (2002) *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 83–85.