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Plot

Karin Kukkonen
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1 Definition

The term “plot” designates the ways in which the events and characters’ actions in a story are arranged and how this arrangement in turn facilitates identification of their motivations and consequences. These causal and temporal patterns can be foregrounded by the narrative discourse itself or inferred by readers. Plot therefore lies between the events of a narrative on the level of story and their presentation on the level of discourse. It is not tied to a particular mode of narrative expression, and it can be observed across media and genres.

While plot constitutes one of the few narratological terms current in everyday discourse *and* in literary criticism, the term has been used in so many contexts that narratologists struggle to define its purview and grapple with its terminology. Nevertheless, three basic ways of conceptualising plot can be distinguished:

> (1) Plot as a fixed, global structure. The configuration of the arrangement of all story events, from beginning, middle to end, is considered.
>
> (2a) Plot as progressive structuration. The connections between story events, motivations and consequences as readers perceive them are considered.
>
> (2b) Plot as part of the authorial design. The author’s way of structuring the narrative to achieve particular effects is considered.

In critical practice, these different conceptualisations of plot are often combined.

2 Explication

Plot is a term employed in many different contexts, and the different uses of the word in English (see *OED* 2013) resonate in its multiple meanings. A brief survey of the terms for (literary) plot in other European languages unfolds some aspects of the concept: from the deeply-engrained narrativity of Aristotle’s “mythos” to the

careful scheming evoked by French “intrigue” and the action-based matter-of-factness implied by German “Handlung.”

Plot can be approached as that feature of narrative which facilitates the mental operations that translate story events into a meaningful narrative. If one conceives of it as a fixed structure (conceptualisation 1), then plot becomes a pattern which yields coherence to the narrative. In the formalist and structuralist traditions, plot enchains story events in typical sequences (see Propp [1928] 1968; Kafalenos 2006), or it re-establishes an equilibrium that has been upset (see Todorov 1971: 51). Other critics, foregrounding plot as structure, distinguish sets of plot types that correspond to basic elements of human experience and shape them into patterns (see Frye 1957; Hogan 2003). In this conceptualisation, plot also has strong ideological salience because it might rehearse particular patterns of thinking in readers and endorse particular gender roles, group identities and parameters of ethical behaviour implied by these plots (see Abbott [2002] 2008; Miller 1980).

If one conceives of plot as a structuration, then it traces the thoughts of readers as they ponder the reasons for events and the motivations of characters and consider the consequences of actions in their quest to make sense of the narrative as a whole (conceptualisation 2a). In this conceptualisation, plot spans the time through which the narrative unfolds. It develops dynamically as readers reconsider the motivation and credibility of the actions and events they read about (see Brooks & Warren 1943 ; Phelan 1989, 2007), recalibrate their expectations in sequences of surprise, curiosity and suspense (see Sternberg 1978; Baroni 2007) and follow the paths which their Freudian desires (see Brooks [1984] 1992) or needs of meaning-making (see Dannenberg 2008) might chart. Such processes of establishing plots in the tapestry of the given can be considered as the mediating strategy of narrative which translates between everyday experience and fictional artefacts (“mise en intrigue”; see Ricœur [1983–85] 1984–88) and gives history its shape and moral relevance (see White 1981).

If one conceives of plot as part of the authorial design (conceptualisation 2b), then it becomes the means through which authors interest readers, keep their attention as the narrative unfolds and bring it to a surprising yet possibly satisfying conclusion. Such authorial design prefigures the mental operations which lead readers to a meaningful narrative. Hence plot might display itself in the discourse of loquacious narrators and emerge as the artistic feat of a particular author (see Crane [1950] 1952). Plots can be designed to create elaborate patterns of coincidence, reversals and recognitions which lead to readers’ insights about what is at stake in the narrative (see Aristotle 1996), to present the different courses a narrative could take in forking plot paths (see Bordwell 2002) or to lead readers away from their

expectations about narrative processes (see Richardson 1997, 2005).

The basic divergence in the discussion around plot occurs between critics who consider plot as the fixed pattern that will have emerged at the end of the narrative (conceptualisation 1) and critics who consider plot as a dynamic development in the progress of the narrative (conceptualisations 2a and 2b). Making the claim that plot is often used exclusively for the summative pattern of a narrative, alternative terms for the dynamic side of plot have been put forward such as “emplotment” (“mise en intrigue”; see Ricœur [1983–85] 1984–88) and “progression” (see Phelan 1989). It seems important, however, to remember that plot is both the process that facilitates readers’ engagement with a story and its target, a pattern of meaning (see also Dannenberg 2008: 13).

3 History of the Concept and its Study

3.1 Plot in Western Poetics and Criticism

Plot as a critical term takes us back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Aristotle defines mythos, usually translated as “plot” in English, as the arrangement of events (synthesis/systasis ton pragmaton) (see *Poetics* 1450a; 1996: 13), and when he lists the features of tragedy, he gives plot the most important role. Plot allows characters to come to the fore through their actions, brings about the emotional involvement of readers through reversal and recognition and generally constitutes “the soul and (as it were) source of tragedy” (1996: 12). To fulfil these functions, plots should be complete, unified and of a magnitude “such as can readily be held in memory” (14). Plots can be simple or complex, involving reversals (when actions have unintended consequences) and recognitions (when the proper relationship between characters are disclosed), with the latter, complex, type of plot being preferred for creating an effect of surprise and moving audiences to pity and fear.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle extends the discussion of plot to genres of narrative beyond tragedy (in particular, to the epic with *The Odyssey*). Later critics developed Aristotle’s principles further for epic, drama and the novel. The neoclassical criticism of Italy and France in the 16th and 17th centuries demotes plot from the single governing principle of narrative to one of the features which authors need to master in order to achieve verisimilitude (*vraisemblance*). At the same time, their detailed consideration of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (and of Horace’s *Art of Poetry*) diversifies our understanding of plot. The French neoclassical critics, for example, distinguish between the protagonist’s exploits (the “action”) and their structuration, establishing links that are both necessary and probable through the author’s “design.” The “fable” of a narrative describes both its plot and the moral instruction

it is supposed to provide (see e.g. Le Bossu [1675] 1708; Swedenberg 1944). The neoclassical metaphor of the thread (“file”) of a plot, featuring the knot (“nœud”) of the complication of the action and its resolution (“dénouement”), leaving no “loose ends” behind, brings greater analytical sharpness to descriptions of plot (see e.g. Scanlan 1977 on Racine; Scherer 1950: 62–90, 125–48); it also offers colourful descriptions of plots that fail (see e.g. Scudéry’s remark that the “Gordian knot” of the plot of Corneille’s *Le Cid* “needs no Alexander” [1638] 1899: 74; translation by K.K.). An understanding of different possible kinds of plots emerges for example in John Dryden’s “Essay of Dramatick Poesie” (1668), where critics distinguished between the tightly-constructed plots of French tragedy and the profuse, more varied plots of English drama.

The assessment of plots for the quality of the links they establish, the moral instruction they provide and the trade-off between coherence and variability they achieve was to remain a key feature of English literary criticism until well into the 19th century: Sir Walter Scott describes (the complex) plot in his review of Austen’s *Emma* as “the object of every skilful novelist” ([1815] 2009: 308); and Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, a novel profoundly engaged with the neoclassical heritage, is praised by Coleridge as “one of the three most perfect plots ever planned” (see Crane [1950] 1952; the other two plots being *Oedipus Rex* and Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*).

In the course of the 19th century, character begins to gain precedence over plot as the most important feature of narrative. Plot becomes associated with the simplicity of the potboiler and the aesthetic short-sightedness of reader caricatures like Miss Prism in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* who declares, “The good end happily, and the bad end unhappily. That is what Fiction means.” Henry James develops his famous juxtaposition of character and incident (“What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?” [1884] 1999: 392) against such reductive understandings of plot. E. M. Forster, even though he provides one of the key definitions of plot as the causal enchainment of story events, stresses the primacy of character. For the genre of the novel in particular, “we have already decided that Aristotle is wrong” (Forster [1927] 1953: 80). Plot, Forster says, works as a “sort of higher government official” (81) who constantly calls upon characters to explain themselves. This goes against the aesthetic ambitions of the novel, with its deep and complex characters, which need not be consistent if it is sufficiently convincing (see also Brooks & Warren 1943).

3.1 Plot as Global Structure

Models of the basic structure of plot have aimed to systematise the development of narrative interest, such as Freytag’s (1908) pyramid of rising and falling dramatic

action (building on Horace’s remarks on the five-act structure in *Ars Poetica*). But with the rise of structuralism, these efforts were directed towards tracing global sequences of events in narrative, such as Propp’s ([1928] 1968) thirty-one narrative functions and Todorov’s (1971: 51) scheme of equilibrium – disturbance – re-establishing the equilibrium. The issue of narrative interest has been more prominent in the debates around canonicity and breach, tellability and eventfulness (Baroni → Tellability [1]; Hühn → Event and Eventfulness [2]). The perspective on plot as structure, on the other hand, has led to critics distinguishing between different kinds of plot and their comparison. Such typologies of plot differentiate for example between fortunate and fatal outcomes (Miller 1980), constellations of storyworlds and characters’ private worlds (Ryan 1991) and patterns of coincidence (Dannenberg 2008). Kafalenos (2006) diversifies the structuralist idea of a fixed prototypical sequence of story events in Propp and Todorov into a more complex and general model of narrative.

In a thematic vein, Frye (1957) establishes a typology of genres and their plots on the basis of the seasons. More recently, Booker (2004) has reduced all narrative to seven basic plot structures: “overcoming the monster,” “rags to riches,” “quest,” “voyage and return,” “comedy,” “tragedy” and “rebirth.” In both their accounts and their terminology, Frye and Booker stress the perennial mythic nature of these plots, which relate to general features of the human experience.

Evolutionary literary criticism has taken a similar approach to plots, detailing the evolutionary relevance of particular kinds of plot (Boyd 2009; Carroll 1999; Gottschall 2008). Cognitive approaches to narrative have categorised generic plots according to the typical emotions their narrative structure elicits (Grodal 1997) as well as for the general emotional patterns they correspond to (Hogan 2003).

As condensations of human experience, such plot types are also bound to political and social situations which come to the fore in the actions that promise (social) success and the options for action that are open to male and female characters. Abbott’s ([2002] 2008) notion of a “master plot,” the structure behind social narratives, more commonly called “metanarratives” (after Lyotard’s “grands récits”), refers to the political power and seductiveness of particular narrative constellations. Feminist narratology (see DuPlessis 1985; Gutenberg 2000; Page 2006) has worked towards plot typologies based on gender issues, especially the distinction between the romance plot (with its telos of love and marriage) and the quest plot (with its telos of adventure and heroics).

3.2 Plot as Progressive Structuration

The structuration of narrative by plot becomes a topic of inquiry in several strands

of narratology. In particular, E. M. Forster's definition of plot as causally connected story events is foundational for many discussions of the phenomenon. According to Forster, story describes: "The king died, and then the queen died," whereas a plot motivates: "The kind died, and then the queen died of grief" ([1927] 1953: 82). The plot "demands intelligence and memory" of readers in order to solve the "mystery" it proposes (83; see also Barthes' "hermeneutic code" in *S/Z* [1970] 1985). The causal aspect of plot has been discussed in several contexts: Aristotle (1996) distinguishes between necessary and probable dimensions of causality while Barthes considers the "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" fallacy (i.e. mistaking sequence for consequence) as the "mainspring of narrative" ([1966] 1977: 94; see also Pier 2008); Richardson (1997) distinguishes between kinds of narrative causality connected to different world views. The mainstream Western tradition of considering plot as a progressing force, as facilitating the mental operations of readers in narrative, tends to rest this idea on the assumption that the paradigmatic plot establishes causality (see Wellek & Warren [1949] 1968).

In response to Propp ([1928]1968) and his reception in structuralism (see e.g. Todorov 1969 on the *Decameron* and Barthes [(1966) 1977] on Fleming's *Goldfinger*) Bremond (1973) stresses the importance of different available possibilities for the connections between plot motifs, thereby offering an alternative to Propp's model of a single track of enchainment. Ryan (1991) brings Bremond's optional model together with possible-worlds theory when she suggests that plot tracks the path by which the textual actual world is realised out of the mental worlds of characters. In a next step, Dannenberg (2008) identifies two characteristic patterns of such actualizing plot paths: coincidental convergence (i.e. fortuitously merging plot paths for the characters) and counterfactual divergence (i.e. "what if?" scenarios in which alternative plot options are explored). Her model combines the heuristic strengths of the reduction of plot patterns with the importance of considering their unfolding through the story. Dannenberg also discusses the historical developments of such constellations of convergence and counterfactuality.

The Russian formalist term "sjužet" has been related repeatedly to the Western notion of plot. In the English translation of Šklovskij's treatment of sjužet as a (quasi-musical) theme uniting different "motifs-situations" in narrative, "constitut[ing] a form no less than rhyme" ([1925] 1990: 46), sjužet becomes "plot." Also in Lotman's ([1970] 1977) definition of sjužet as providing the transgressive salience that constitutes a narrative event, the term is translated as "plot." Chatman's (1978: 43) discussion of plot as "story-as-discoursed," which stresses that story events are reordered through narrative discourse, draws on Tomaševskij's ([1925]1965: 66–8) distinction between fabula (events in the actual temporal and causal order) and sjužet (events in the order presented in the narrative, which establishes its own

temporal and causal relations) (cf. Schmid 2009; also Tomaševskij's translators use the term "plot" for sjužet). For his discussion of film, Bordwell (1985) pries apart sjužet from style (story presentation in cinematic techniques) in an important conceptual move which separates plot from discourse. The distinction between sjužet as story events reordered (i.e. plot) and sjužet as the rich, detailed texture of the narrative (i.e. discourse) is not always clearly made, which is partly due to the terminological complications with Genette's "histoire" and "discours" (and particularly the translation of his work into English; Genette [1972] 1980). Between the Russian, French and Anglo-Saxon traditions of narrative analysis, the constitution of narrative levels and the role of plot within them has developed into a rather complex and confusing field (cf. Pier 2003; Scheffel → Narrative Constitution [3]).

Not only causal but temporal sequence, too, invites structuration of the plot. Sternberg (1978) distinguishes four such processes of temporality between plot-type fabula and sjužet (causal) and story-type fabula and sjužet (additive). His discussion also brings to the fore three cognitive effects of readers' engagement with this temporal arrangement of events, which to some extent chart readers' tracing of the structuration of the plot: surprise (when readers discover a gap in their hypothesis-building), curiosity (retrospection; when the gap lies in the antecedent story events) and suspense (prospection; when the gap lies in the story events to follow). As he stresses the importance of plot ("intrigue") for the development of tension in narrative texts and their effects on readers, Baroni (2007) expands Sternberg's model by calling attention to the contextual knowledge which facilitates gap-filling hypotheses as well as to the emotional dimension of plot. Models of the unfolding emotional appraisals of narrative situations (Hogan 2011) and the economy of emotional arousal in narrative (Warhol 2003) have been developed more generally in recent cognitive and feminist narratology, thus providing important complements to the traditional focus on plot as predominantly concerned with the processing of narrative information.

The plot and its structuration of story events have also been discussed for the telos they establish, and closure has often been considered as the most important element in the Aristotelian sequence of beginning, middle and end because everything leads up to it in the arc of tension which the narrative spreads throughout the plot. From this perspective, Kermode defines plot as follows: "The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form" (1967: 45). He relates the "tock," and the importance narratives take from their ending, to death and the notion of apocalypse. Brooks inscribes the importance of the ending for narrative dynamics within a psychoanalytical model. Drawing on Freud's "pleasure principle" and its

relation to eros and thanatos, Brooks identifies in reading a “desire for the end reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour [i.e. retardations and repetitions], the intentional deviance, [...] which is the plot of narrative” ([1984] 1992: 104). This focus on the ending has been criticised as foreshortening the reading experience (see Phelan 1989: 111), but it also constitutes one way of thinking about the double nature of plot which, on the one hand, unfolds as a (temporal, causal) sequence and, on the other hand, is designed to lead to a certain meaningful ending.

3.3 Plot as Authorial Design

R. S. Crane ([1950] 1952) moves the discussion of plot from (what he perceives as) the neoclassical checklist of the well-formed plot to a better understanding of the intrinsic connectedness of plot with other features of narrative. He distinguishes between three “synthesizing principles”: action (a change in the protagonist’s situation brought about by her actions), character (a change in the moral character of the protagonist) and thought (a change in the protagonist’s mode of thinking). Plots of action, of character and of thought constitute the “working power” of a narrative, and it is thus, according to Crane, a key requirement of criticism to study the form of plot as it unfolds. Crane’s own analysis of *Tom Jones* does not establish a fixed structure but traces how Fielding builds up the plot of his narrative, taking into account what readers know at any given point in the narrative and what their expectations are. Also Brooks and Warren (1943) emphasise the need for such close attention to authorial design.

Two strands of narratology in particular stress plot’s aspect of authorial design: rhetorical narratology and unnatural narratology.

Rhetorical narratology focuses on how plot is arranged to engage readers and their judgements as the narrative unfolds. Phelan takes up Crane’s analytical perspective when he develops his own notion of “progression” (1989). “Progression” looks in particular at the authorial design directing readers’ exposure to story events and the temporal sequence and structuration through the plot in reading. It describes both the internal development of a narrative (“textual dynamics”) and the response of readers as this development unfolds (“readerly dynamics”). Each of these dynamics applies both to story and discourse levels, leaving Phelan (2007) with four tracks of “progression.” For each of these dynamics, he distinguishes between positions of beginning, middle and end. In their contribution to Herman et al. 2012, Phelan and Rabinowitz confine plot, termed “plot dynamics,” to the story-level in “textual dynamics.”

Unnatural narratology focuses on how plot design challenges and confounds readers’

expectations through the wilful deformation of anticipated plot events, narrative sequences that have to be reassembled by readers themselves, unnatural temporalities and forking-path plots (Richardson 2005; Herman et al. 2012; but see Bordwell 2002 on how forking-path narratives can be naturalised). Both of these strands of narratology, rhetorical and unnatural, favour the term “progression” because it seems to be a more adequate way to capture the dynamic nature of plot development, as becomes apparent in Herman et al. (2012: 57–81) in a section devoted to time, plot and progression. However, Warhol’s discussion (in the same collection) of the gender implications of plot as a structure or constellation of options for action and roles underlines the continuing importance of considering all aspects of plot.

3.4 Plot Beyond Fictional Narrative

Philosophically inflected treatments of plot stress the interaction between plot as structure and structuration and its importance for shaping human thought. Discussing Ricœur and White, Dorrit Cohn highlights the “signposts of fictionality” when she differentiates between historical narrative, which “*em*plots” the actual events, and fictional narrative, which is simply “plotted” without reference to actual events (1990: 781). White defines plot as “a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as part of a whole” (1981: 9). According to White, this double nature of plot relates the (historical) text to the social and moral system it endorses and which it reveals to be already immanent in reality (19). Ricœur ([1983–85] 1984–88) creates a comprehensive model of the hermeneutic loop between designing and understanding narrative on the basis of plot. The experience of time, according to Ricœur, needs to be articulated in narrative through the process of emplotment (“mise en intrigue”). Emplotment describes how the everyday experience of mimesis 1 (“prefigured time”) is integrated—structurally, symbolically and temporally—into the meaningful narrative constellations of mimesis 2 (“configured time”). The narrative design of mimesis 2, “the kingdom of the *as if*,” is then the basis of the hermeneutic process which translates back into a refined grasp of the real world, mimesis 3. In Ricœur’s model, the process of emplotment facilitates the transitions between the levels of mimesis. The social and political dimension of such “emplotment” is inscribed in Ricœur’s model (Abbott → Narrativity [4]). Ricœur is careful to stress that he is interested in the dynamics of plot rather than in its fixed structure, i.e. the pattern that will have emerged at the end of the narrative; however, his culturally embedded model also offers a framework for how masterplots can emerge and why authors might draw on the sedimented configurations of established plot patterns as short-cuts to cultural relevance.

4

Topics for Further Investigation

At the core of narrative inquiry since Aristotle, reconceptualised and refined (sometimes beyond recognition) since, it seems that there might not be a lot left to say about plot. Nevertheless, plot remains a key constituent of narrative. As new kinds of narrative, such as the large narratives of TV series and serialised comic books or the ludic interactions of computer games, gain cultural relevance, their plot structures and structurations need to be explored (Neitzel → Narrativity of Computer Games [5]).

The mutual dependence between plot and the constitution of the fictional world, already at the core of the plot concept of Dannenberg (2008), can be reconsidered from the perspective of cognitive probability theory (Kukkonen forthcoming). Plot is understood as part of a "probability design" in which the pacing of how story events are revealed to readers and the verisimilitude of the fictional world form a feedback loop that leads to the (sometimes) profound change in what readers accept as likely outcomes between the beginning and the end of a narrative.

Introducing the notion of "negative plotting," Lanser (2011) outlines how competing plots, "one shadowing the other," become meaningful in their mutual contrast, negotiate different narrative perspectives and broker the struggle for interpretive dominance. She distinguishes between explicit, implicit and imposed kinds of negative plotting.

Despite the rich repertoire of narratives which play with different plot types, or reject a well-wrought plot altogether, and apart from unnatural narratology and a few forays into plot tricks and plot holes (see Ryan 2009) as well as plotless narratives (see Pettersson 2012), most critical attention has been directed to successful and prototypical plots. The dark underbelly of negative plots, failed plots and plotless narratives offer a vast, yet largely untapped area open for narratological inquiry.

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