

# Enchaining of Events: Plot in Narrative Theory

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## Abstract

*The concept of the plot has gone through many changes since the Greeks till the structuralist and post-structuralist narrative theorists. This paper is an attempt to review the theorisation of the concept of plot by some of the theorists from Aristotle to Mikhail Bakhtin. Aristotle as well as a structuralist thinker like Roland Barthes underline the importance of action for any narrative to take place. But, as Mikhail Bakhtin would claim, it is the chronotope that gives body to the action of a narrative.*

**Keywords:** Narrative, Action, Chronotope, Bakhtin, Aristotle.

## Introduction

The metalanguage of literature, since Aristotle's 'The Poetics' has tried to define the phenomena of plot in various ways. The process of rethinking the concept of the plot has been going on. Remarkably, a story can be presented with the use of a variety of means and that too retaining the same plot structure. Of course, one cannot deny the possibility of change in the chronology of plot events. For example, a novel series like *Harry Potter* written by J K Rowling has its film version. One can narrate the story of the same novel series orally to a keen listener. Thus, we get here three separate modes of presentation of the same narrative. Considering the basic mode of presentation, remarkably the plot remains the same. One can tell the story of *Harry Potter*, being faithful to the original chronological order of the events or one can simply deny doing this. It is possible to do the same with all sorts of narrative fiction. Consequently, we arrive at a point where we need to think about what is it that makes the plot of a narrative fiction flexible to this extent. Before we engage with the problem of this particular aspect of plot let us first take a look at various thinkers who have defined plot.

## Preliminary Remarks on Action

The plot as an aspect of the narrative is thought about frequently and demands redefinitions and

modifications. Considering the wide range of thinkers who tried to define 'plot' one has to look at the various aspects of the concept. Let me begin with Aristotle's definition of 'plot'. In Aristotle's 'Poetics', written about 330 B.C. we find some passages that relate to the plot. "...thought and characters-are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions all the success or failure depends. Hence, the plot is the imitation of the action:-for by plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents." (Butcher 25).

Aristotle rates the plot highest among various aspects of tragedy. The actions performed by the agents are the pre-requisite of the tragedy. According to Aristotle tragedy cannot take place without action. It is the action that opens up the 'play' of possibilities of certain consequences. (Aristotle does not define plot beyond this point but it is important as later on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Formalists and Structuralists work on the same lines.) Aristotle's distinction of types of plot. Simple plot: does not contain peripety and discovery. Complex plot: does contain peripety and discovery. The importance of action is clear in this scheme of classification. Something or the other has to happen to get the consequences, tragic or comic. Aristotle writing in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC happens to be the first philosopher to devote an entire book to talk about literature that is poetry. Aristotle indicates that

emplotting a literary work (epic, drama, lyric, dithyrambic poetry) is an art.

Aristotle in his book "The Poetics" considers action as the most important aspect. Without action, tragedy cannot happen and that's where Peripetia and Anagnorisis come in. The plot that contains Peripetia and Anagnorisis is complex and the one that does not contain these elements is simple. It is the internal structure of the plot that should allow the reversal of fortune to take place. Recognition should precede a reversal of fortune considering the cause-and-effect rule. Aristotle talks about the importance of causal necessity in the arrangement of events. "Now, according to our definition, Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it." (Butcher 31) Here Aristotle's view of the arrangement of the plot is rigid. The schema of arrangement is totally dependent on the cause-and-effect relationship. It is like event 1 necessarily should cause event 2, and event 2 causally leads to event 3 and so on. Aristotle uses examples from the Odyssey and the Iliad. At a later point narrative fiction and drama started employing techniques like interior monologue and stream of consciousness and the logic in the arrangements of the events became less prominent. Tzvetan Todorov has something very interesting to say about this situation. "Most works of fiction of the past are organised according to an order that we may qualify as both temporal and logical...causality is closely linked to temporality. It is even easy to confuse the two...but if almost every causal narrative also possesses a temporal order, we only rarely manage to perceive the latter." (Todorov

42-43) As readers, we are traditionally habituated to read logic in the events given in chronological order. It is a logical fallacy. The Latin phrase for this fallacy is 'Post hoc ergo propter hoc (after this therefore this).

### Formalism

Though prescriptive and rigid, Aristotle's ideas of plot are extremely important as we can trace the signs of Aristotle's concept of action in some of the later thinkers categorized as Russian Formalists and Structuralists. Amongst Russian Formalist critics Victor Shklovsky and Boris Tomachevsky are important and have to be considered here to enquire into the way the plot was thought about.

Victor Shklovsky in his essay "Art and Technique" puts forth the idea of 'defamiliarisation'. He attacks Potebniaism that is 'art is thinking in images' and its purpose is to present the unknown (most often the abstract or transcendent) in terms of the known. For Shklovsky the process of perception of art has to be prolonged to achieve aesthetic pleasure. Our perceptions generally are automatic. We get habituated to the perception of a particular kind of art and its repetitive way of presentation. Thus, art needs to develop a variety of techniques to defamiliarize the artwork. Consequently, perception of art is no longer automatic and aesthetic pleasure can be achieved with the prolonged process of perception. Here the object of perception is not important but its representation is important. "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important." (Lemon and Reis 12) The examples that Shklovsky gives from Tolstoy's novels and erotic art, elaborate more on the concept of defamiliarization. The Russian Formalist critics were concerned with the literariness of

language of literature and its form. I mentioned Shklovsky here for two reasons: one to point out how the presentation of literature became the centre point to study literature and secondly, it's a kind of background to talk about Boris Tomashevsky's concepts of story and plot. Tomashevsky in his essay 'Thematics' describes the story and plot based on the arrangement of the thematic elements. He distinguishes story and plot as follows: "Let us take up the notion of the story, the aggregate of mutually related events reported in the work. No matter how the events were originally arranged in the work and despite their original order of introduction, in practice the story may be told in the actual chronological and causal order of events. Plot is distinct from story. Both include the same events but in the plot the events are arranged and connected according to the orderly sequence in which they were presented in the work." (Lemon and Reis 66-67)

For Tomashevsky the arrangement of the events is plot. After talking about the main feature of plot Tomashevsky discusses the types of motifs: Free motif, Bound motif, Dynamic motif and Idyllic Motif. He ranks the motifs according to their importance to the narrative. According to Tomashevsky Bound motifs cannot be omitted from a narrative whereas a narrative can very well do without free motifs. Tomashevsky's concept of the motif and its ranking resembles what Roland Barthes means by 'functional units' in his essay 'Structural Analysis of narratives'. I will discuss this in detail later while dealing with Roland Barthes' concept of emplotment.

Victor Shklovsky uses his idea of defamiliarization to define the plot. "The idea of plot too often is confused with the description of events-with what I propose provisionally to call the story. The story is, in fact, only material for plot formulation." (Lemon and Reis p.57) For Shklovsky Plot is a story distorted or defamiliarized in the process of telling. There are several narratives dealing with the theme

of Love and represented in totally different ways. Shklovsky and Tomashevsky both revolve around linguistic tricks and the presentation of events.

Vladimir Propp is one more interesting thinker who makes the analysis of the plot mathematical. Propp's book, "Morphology of Folk Tales" published in the year 1928 is generally acknowledged to be one of the most important studies of the nature of narratives. The term morphology refers to the study of structures or forms looking at the components of the same system and seeing how they relate to each other. "We shall insist that as long as no correct morphological study exists, there can be no correct historical study. If we are capable of breaking the tale into its components, we will not be able to make a correct comparison" (Propp 15) After dealing with the history of the problem of approach to the study of folk tales, Propp puts forth his idea of function. He starts by pointing out that a given action may be done by any number of different characters in a narrative. Functions are the actions performed by characters and the consequences of these actions for the narrative. According to Propp these functions are independent of the characters performing them and are the fundamental elements of a narrative. Propp asserts that there are only a limited number of functions (31) and that the sequence of functions found in folktales and fairy tales is always identical; all such stories have the same structure. He gives the example of four characters performing the same function.

1. A tsar gives an eagle to a hero. The eagle carries the hero away to another kingdom.
2. An old man gives Sucevka a horse. The horse carries Sucevka away to another kingdom.
3. A sorcerer gives Ivan a little boat. The boat takes Ivan to another kingdom.
4. A princess gives Ivan a ring. Young men appearing from out of the ring carry Ivan away into another kingdom and so forth.

Both constants and variables are present in the preceding instances. The names of the dramatis personae change (as well as the attributes to each), but neither their actions nor functions change.” (Propp19-20)

Propp’s work is important here because the functions he found in his study of a hundred folk tales are not limited to the stories he studied; with minor adaptations, many of his functions can be applied to modern narratives as well. Propp offers us a syntagmatic analysis of narratives; a syntagm is a chain. The enchaining of functions is what we get.

No.	Designation	Definition	Description
1	B	Absensation	One of the members of a family is absent.
2	Y	Interdiction	An interdiction is addressed to the Hero.
3	d	Violation	The interdiction is violated.
14	F	Receipt of agent	The hero acquires the use of magical agent.
25	M	Difficult task	A difficult task is proposed to the hero.
28	Ex	Exposure	The false hero or villain is exposed.

The table above gives us an idea of Propp’s functions and the way he designates them signs. Propp analyses the tales and an example of this kind will be more helpful for us to understand how he arrives at the grammar of a folktale. “This tale furnishes us with an initial situation (the goat and the kids), the absence of an elder, an interdiction, the fraudulent persuasion of the villain (the wolf), the violation of the interdiction, the kidnapping of a member of the family, communication of the misfortune, a search, the slaying of the villain (a very

interesting instance of an assimilation with difficult tasks: the goat proposes to the wolf that he jump over a pit; compare no.137: the princess proposes to the tsar that he cross over a pit on a pole)...”

The above given functions furnish the following scheme:

“Y<sup>1</sup> B<sup>1</sup> d<sup>1</sup> a<sup>1</sup>B<sup>4</sup> C<sup>1</sup> I<sup>6</sup> K<sup>1</sup> ↓”(Propp p. 101)

But Propp’s notion of structure has a problem, as for him every function opens up a set of alternative consequences. Bremond Claude criticizes Propp’s idea of structure as it produces the impossibility of opposed consequences of the function. Bremond uses the linguistic model to support his argument saying that Propp works from the point of view of Parole and not of langue. “But if we pass from the point of view of speech acts which use terminal constraints (the end of the sentence determining the choice of the first words), to that of the linguistic system (the beginning of the sentence determining its end), the direction of implication is reversed. We should construct our sequence of functions starting with the terminus a quo which in the general language of plots opens a new network of possibilities, and not with the terminus ad quen. In respect to which the particular speech acts of Russian tales make their selection from among possibilities.” (Culler 209) Bremond argues that this teleological conception of structure is unacceptable.

### Structuralists and Post-Structuralists

Till we come to the structuralists we find the linguistic models becoming base for the narrative analysis. Roland Barthes in his essay ‘An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives’ discusses the level of functions where the emplotment of a narrative takes place. Barthes distinguishes three levels of narrative as, functions, actions and narration. According to the mode of progressive integration, these levels are bound together. Until the functions are performed by the

actants they are not materialized. These functions have to be narrated so that they receive its final meaning. Here we are more concerned with the functional level. "The essence of a function is, so to speak the seed that it sows in the narrative, planting an element that will come to fruition later - either on the same level or another level." (Barthes 89)

According to Barthes a narrative in its entirety is made up of functions. We can divide it into functional units. Barthes states two major classes of functions; distributional and integrational. The functions at the distributional level are the same that Propp talks about, but here Barthes deals with them in much more detail. For example, James Bond's picking up of a telephone receiver has to correlate to the moment when it will be put down. Integrational units comprise 'Indices'. Indices is a unit that refers not to a consequential or complementary act but more or less a defuse concept which is necessary to the meaning of the story. It does not change the course of the story the way hinge points do. Indices are data information, description of setting, locale and atmosphere. To understand the indicial notation one needs to move to a higher level; either of action or narration. In the class of function, all its units are not of the same importance. Barthes describes them as 'real hinge points' of the narratives that change the course of the narrative and others merely fill in the narrative space separating the hinge functions. Nuclei, cardinal functions and catalysers are important as far as the enchaining of the events is concerned. Here Barthes starts working on the micro level of narrative. "Catalysers are only consecutive units, cardinal functions are both consecutive and consequential. Everything suggests indeed, that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence." (Barthes 94)

Barthes' observation of narrative producing confusion between consequence and consecution is important. Thus, from the point of view of the

narrative, a catalyser's functionality is weak but not nil. It participates in the economy of the message; it accelerates, delays and gives new propellant to the discourse. The catalyser ceaselessly revives the semantic tension of the discourse, saying ceaselessly that there has been, that there is going to be meaning. Thus, we can say that catalysers help to maintain the relationship between the narrator and the reader. Barthes gives the same importance to both functional units. "A nucleus cannot be deleted without altering the story; but neither can a catalyst without altering the discourse." (Barthes 95)

Barthes appears to be far clearer while talking about units and their importance to the plot. Tomashevsky with his concepts 'free motif' and 'bound motif' appears to be vague. Barthes also talks about 'informants', which work as data information of place, time and atmosphere. Informants are not located on the higher level the way indices can be located. With nuclei, catalysers, indices and informants have a common feature which is expansion. This is the descriptive mode of talking about the plot. Propp and Barthes do it with as much certitude as possible.

The last thinker I would like to discuss here is Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" discusses the idea of chronotope. For him, "The intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" are chronotopes. In literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are brought together into one carefully thought-out concrete whole. According to Bakhtin it is the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions. Bakhtin talks about different chronotopes in different genres starting with 'Greek Romance' and ending with the Rabelaisian novel. Like Propp and Aristotle, Bakhtin too talks about the arrangement of events. But Bakhtin is more concerned with Chronotope. In the 11nd section

Apuleis and Petronius Bakhtin talks about new adventure time which is distinct from Greek adventure time. "The plot (sjuzet) of *The Golden Ass* is in no sense an extra temporal hiatus between two adjacent moments of real life sequence ...The basic plot of the novel the life story of Lucius is presented as the course of a life sheathed in a metamorphosis." (Bakhtin111)

Particular chronotopes reserve particular events to happen. Chivalric Romance, folkloric chronotope, ancient biography and autobiography, and Idyllic chronotope in the novel, all these chronotopes are part of particular genres. In the concluding remarks, he talks about the chronotope of road. "The road is particularly good place for random encounters...The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement." (Bakhtin243-344)

Chronotopes, thus, emerge significant for narrative as they are the organizing centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The Chronotope according to Bakhtin is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. The grammar for narratives that Propp provides us can be concretised with the chronotope. "The chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence." (Bakhtin 250) According to Bakhtin chronotope works as a primary means for materializing time in space. It concretizes representation. The narration of events happening somewhere else, located far from the chronotope, appear to be dry information. Bakhtin in the concluding remarks distinguishes Chronotopes into two types; one major chronotope and the other minor chronotope. These chronotopes mutually inclusive and they may be interwoven.

## Conclusion

After looking at the concepts of plot put forth by all these thinkers one can say that action remains the basic aspect of plot for most of them. For Shklovsky it's the defamiliarization in telling the story and for Tomashevsky it's the arrangement of the events of the story. Let us come to the issue we were trying to discuss at the beginning of this research paper. It can be said that action can take place without any consideration of chronology and logic. Thus, it is the action that has to be the centre of the plot. Bakhtin's idea of chronotope adds a new dimension to the concept of the plot as we cannot separate action from the time and space in which it takes place. Though a particular chronotope produces particular events, the existence of action traversing any kind of space and time is indubitable. In all sorts of narrative fiction, the existence of chronotope with action cannot be denied.

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