Narrative Causalities

Kafalenos, Emma

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Kafalenos, Emma.
Narrative Causalities.
The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28182.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28182

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1177458
CHAPTER 1

READING NARRATIVE CAUSALITIES:
Functions and Functional Polyvalence

Whenever something that happens attracts our attention, everyone everywhere engages in more or less the same initial interpretive process. Once our attention is focused, however briefly, on something that happens or something someone does, we begin to interpret the action we noticed by considering what may have motivated it and (or or) what that action may make happen. If we see a child scratching her arm, and she is outdoors at nightfall during mosquito season, we may interpret her gesture of scratching as motivated by a desire to ease the discomfort of a mosquito bite she has just received. In this interpretation the child’s action is a response to a prior event. On the other hand, watching the child, we may worry that she will hurt herself by scratching, and be uncomfortable for days. In this interpretation, the child’s action is a potential cause of a later condition. Both interpretations represent an effort to understand an action, to give it meaning by exploring its possible causes and consequences. As I am using the terms, meaning is an interpretation of the relations between a given action (or happening or situation) and other actions (happenings, situations) in a causal sequence. Interpretation, in the restricted sense in which I use the word in this study, refers to the process of analyzing the causal relations between an action or happening and other actions, happenings, and situations one thinks of as related.

Something someone does and something that happens, in narrative studies, are referred to as events. To be able to engage in interpretation and give meaning to events, we need to have internalized an abstract pattern of a causal sequence. The cognitive theorist Mark Turner argues that the human mind is predisposed to interpret the events he calls “small spatial stories”—“a child throws a rock, a
mother pours milk into a glass, a whale swims through the water”—as the motivated action of an agent (The Literary Mind, 13). Generally at an early point in our intellectual development, I maintain, we create for ourselves and internalize a pattern of causality that extends (in the versions most of us constitute) from the onset of a problem through stages that potentially can lead to its resolution. When something someone does catches our attention, we interpret the person’s action by considering it in relation to this pattern. We place (tentatively, at least) the action that we noticed in one or another position in our internalized causal sequence, and then we consider what other events (possible causes, possible effects) to place in other positions in the sequence.

This interpretive process is fundamental to what Gérard Genette has called “narrative competence” (Narrative Discourse, 77). While narrative competence may vary from individual to individual as well as from culture to culture, being able to read or listen to a reported sequence of events and make sense of it necessitates, I will argue, two conceptual leaps. The first is to conceive the reported events as temporally related (occurring one after another in a chronological sequence), and the second, equally important, is to conceive them as potentially causally related. Probably human beings develop narrative competence by listening to stories and (in literate cultures) reading stories. If this is the case, it would help to explain why every culture has had its narratives. When children listen to and later read the stories that in their cultures are significant, they would then be learning, in addition to cultural data, the abstract patterns that underlie chronological and causal relations. The similarity between interpreting the situations and events that we perceive in our world, and interpreting the situations and events that are reported in narratives—whether literary narratives or reports of events in our world—suggests that both procedures require narrative competence, and that practice in either procedure can enhance a person’s skills in both.

A narrative, in the definition I use, is a sequential representation of a sequence of events. This definition, formulated by Meir Sternberg, emphasizes narrative’s two paths as its distinctive feature: the chronological path in which the events are reported to have occurred, which readers (listeners, viewers) with narrative competence construct in response to the information they are given, and the path of the representation, which we perceive incrementally, segment by segment. According to this definition, narratives include representations of events that take place in fictional worlds (novels, stories)
and our world (biographies, newspaper articles), representations that show (drama) and those that tell (stories), verbal representations and those in other media—film, ballet, comics, photonovels—that represent sequentially two or three or more events or a situation and an event that changes it. I am claiming that human beings engage in the same initial interpretive process in response to the events in our world that attract our attention and to those that are brought to our attention in narratives, and that, in response to narratives, we bring the same interpretive process (if at times more soberly) to the events in our world that are reported in newspapers and on the nightly news and to the events that take place in fictional worlds that are reported in television series, films, and novels. In all these cases, when an event attracts our attention, whether the event is in our world or in a fictional world, we explore its meaning by analyzing the causal relations between a perceived or a reported event and other events or situations we think of as related. Moreover, characters in fictional worlds and narrators who report the events that take place in fictional worlds engage in this same initial interpretive process.

A theory of interpretive sites, or functions, that I have developed gives names to these interpretations. In response to the poststructuralist interest in interpretation, I adopt and adapt the term function, which has generally been associated with Formalist and structuralist thought, to create a tool to trace shifts in individuals’ and communities’ interpretations over time and differences in interpretations from perceiver to perceiver. As I define the term, a function names a position in an abstract causal sequence. I identify ten positions (sites, stages) in a causal sequence that begins at the onset of a problem and leads to its resolution. By naming these positions, functions facilitate analyzing and comparing people’s and narrators’ and characters’ interpretations of causal relations as they develop and change (or fail to change) in response to new information.

In this chapter, after briefly introducing the ten functions I identify, I demonstrate in a close reading of a very short story (one of the shortest of the stories collected by the Brothers Grimm) some of the differences that distinguish one interpretation from another and that functions can name, and I begin to suggest the kinds of information that analyzing the function of events guides interpreters to consider. Throughout this book, when I speak of “readers (listeners, viewers),” I am talking about human beings—not hypothetical constructs—and I am interested in the correlations between the way human beings interpret events in narratives and in our world. Nonetheless, with few exceptions I analyze novels and stories. I do
this in part to draw attention to the richness and complexity inherent in even our initial interpretive response—our interpretations of causal relations, which is my topic—to works of literature that I love. But I also appreciate the advantages for analysis both of the medium of the printed page, which readers can digest at their own pace and revisit and find unchanged, and, for fictional worlds, of a finite source of information. I nonetheless assume that our initial interpretive response to novels and stories is so analogous that it can be taken as a pattern for analyzing our initial interpretive response to events in our world, to narratives that represent events in our world, and to narrative representations in other media. After this chapter, this book is designed to allow its readers to move freely to any subsequent chapter. But to avoid repetition, the subsequent chapters are written for readers who are familiar with the ideas and vocabulary introduced in this chapter.

Readers (listeners, viewers) of a narrative travel along the path of the representation, receiving information sequentially. If one conceives this path as an undifferentiated flow, without landmarks or signposts or buoys, then the process of traveling along the path is exceedingly difficult to describe or even to consider. A vocabulary of functions that name positions (sites, stages) in a causal sequence enables describing and comparing individual experiences of moving through a narrative. My theory of functions is developed from ideas, which I see as interrelated, introduced by narrative theorists Tzvetan Todorov and Vladimir Propp.

Todorov, who analyzed the plots of the stories in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* in the late 1960s, recognized that in many of these stories periods of equilibrium (or stability) alternate with periods of imbalance (or instability). An *equilibrium*, in Todorov’s words, is “the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society.” During a period of equilibrium, as I use the term, the characters whose lives are represented consider the prevailing situation acceptable. Periods of equilibrium, Todorov sees, “are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement” (“Structural Analysis of Narrative,” 328). During a period of imbalance, in other words, the characters whose lives are represented consider the prevailing situation unacceptable and as needing to be changed. The pattern of alternation that Todorov perceived in the *Decameron* offers sign-
posts to look for—signs that indicate an equilibrium and signs that indicate imbalance—that enable readers (listeners, viewers) of any narrative to talk about where they are, or (at least) where they think they are and where they think they are going, as they make their way along a narrative path.

Specifically, Todorov discerned in the stories he analyzed a recurrent cyclical unit: the movement from one equilibrium, through a period of imbalance, to a new equilibrium that is similar but not identical to the first (“La Grammaire du récit,” 96). Initially calling this unit a “minimal plot,” Todorov then introduces a term that I too use: the sequence (96, 101). I cite Todorov’s analysis that indicates that he conceives the sequence, as I do, as an abstraction, in relation to which to view and describe the varying shapes of real narratives. In Boccaccio’s Decameron, he reports, “One story coincides often, but not always, with one sequence: a story can contain several sequences, or contain only a part of one sequence” (101). Stories that contain only a part of a sequence, he specifies later in the article, may move from an equilibrium only to an imbalance, or may begin at an imbalance and move to an equilibrium (101–2).

Todorov’s discovery that the plots of the stories in the Decameron can be perceived as alternating cyclically from periods of equilibrium to periods of imbalance and back to an equilibrium opens the possibility of looking at all narratives not as an undifferentiated flow of information but as a cyclical path in which periods of equilibrium alternate with periods of imbalance. I am proposing that during the process of moving through any narrative, readers (listeners, viewers) interpret (tentatively) a given scene as a relatively stable equilibrium (and wonder what will disrupt it), and another scene as a crucial disruption (and wonder how and whether stability can be restored). Along this path that alternates between equilibrium and disruption, perceived by Todorov, the functions that Propp discerned situate and name additional positions or stages.

In his Morphology of the Folktale, published in 1928, Propp reported the thirty-one functions he found in the Russian tales he analyzed. From the thirty-one, I select ten that recur in narratives of various periods and genres, and, for these ten, I provide definitions that are more abstract than Propp’s, and that are designed to reveal the general situations that underlie the specific circumstances of the stories he studied. Although I have derived these ten functions from Propp’s work and, like Propp, from analyzing narratives, I conceive my ten-function model as denoting positions
(sites, stages) in an abstract causal sequence—a logical pattern that readers (listeners, viewers) with narrative competence bring to the analysis of the narratives they encounter.¹

For Propp, a function is “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action” (21), or defined “according to its consequences” (67). Propp does not specify who defines the significance or consequences of the act. Perhaps he even understands and is saying that any given narrative “defines”—by revealing—the consequences of reported events. As I understand the word, however, if readers or characters or narrators “define” an event according to its consequences, or its significance, they are interpreting its consequences or significance. In my terms, functions represent events that change a prevailing situation and initiate a new situation. A vocabulary of functions enables identifying, naming, and comparing interpretations of an event’s consequences and causes.

Because the causal relations between a given event and related events and situations depend on which events or situations the interpreter considers related, and on the given event’s chronological position among the related events and situations, an event can express one function in one narrative and another function in another narrative. This attribute of the event—that it is subject to interpretations that may shift according to the context in which it is perceived—is functional polyvalence, Lubomír Doleček’s term (Occidental Poetics, 144) for the phenomenon Propp discovered.⁶ Functions name an interpretation of an event in the context in which it is perceived. I argue in this book that narratives determine the context in which events are perceived and that, by doing so, intentionally or otherwise, guide interpretations of the events’ causes and effects: their function.

The ten functions that name positions in a causal sequence, in the model I have developed (figure 1), offer an abstract pattern—like Todorov’s sequence but more detailed—in relation to which to view and describe the varying shapes of real narratives. Immediately following an initial equilibrium (EQ), I place Propp’s function A or function (lower-case) a. Function A represents an action or a happening that disrupts an equilibrium and by changing a situation introduces a period of imbalance. Function a represents a reevaluation that reveals instability in an otherwise unchanged situation. Either a function-A or a function-a event, by disrupting a prevailing equilibrium, initiates a period of imbalance—a function-A or function-a situation—in the cyclical alternation between equilibrium and imbalance that Todorov observed.
A (or a) destabilizing event (or reevaluation that reveals instability)

B request that someone alleviate A (or a)

C decision by C-actant to attempt to alleviate A (or a)
(The C-actant is the character who performs function C.)

C’ C-actant’s initial act to alleviate A (or a)

D C-actant is tested
E C-actant responds to test
F C-actant acquires empowerment

G C-actant arrives at the place, or time, for H

H C-actant’s primary action to alleviate A (or a)

I (or $I_{neg}$) success (or failure) of H

A function is a position in a causal sequence. The ten functions locate positions (sites, stages) along a path that leads from the disruption of an equilibrium to a new equilibrium. A complete sequence—from the onset of imbalance to its resolution—will include all five key functions (A, C, C', H, I) and may include any or all of the five additional functions (B, D, E, F, G).

Functions represent events that change a prevailing situation and initiate a new situation.

Figure 1: THE TEN FUNCTIONS
With the addition of functions B through I, which I adopt from Propp, the functions that I identify enable analyses that are more specific than Todorov’s sequence allows. Functions B through I name positions or stages along a logical path of motivated action that is undertaken in response to a disruptive event (function A, or a) and designed to resolve the effects of the disruptive event and establish a new equilibrium. As we shall see, not every function is embodied in every narrative. Some functions are useful in illuminating causal relations in certain narratives and not in others; the usefulness of other functions becomes apparent when we interpret other narratives.

Clearly readers vary in what they pay attention to as they read. We know this from our students’ responses, from discussions with colleagues, and from reading literary criticism. Nonetheless most readers (listeners, viewers), I suggest, are particularly alert to signs that they read as indicating five key moments along the logical path that leads from one equilibrium to a new equilibrium. Function A (or a) marks the first of these key moments. The next two are marked by functions C and C’ (pronounced “C prime”): the decision (C) and the initial motivated action (C’) to attempt to resolve the function-A (or function-a) disruption. I will return to the distinction between C and C’ later in this chapter and again in chapter 4. Functions C and C’ represent actions performed by an intelligent being (human or anthropomorphic) that I call the C-actant: the character who performs function C. Like the word protagonist, which is a related term but not synonymous, “C-actant” avoids the evaluation that the word hero implies. The final two key moments are marked by function H and function I or Ineg: the C-actant’s primary action (H) to resolve the function-A or function-a disruption, and the conclusion of that action, whether in success (I) or failure (Ineg).

When the five key moments are considered sequentially, the logical relations among them are evident.

*Prevailing Equilibrium*

(1) Function A (an event that disrupts the equilibrium) or a (a reevaluation that discerns instability)

(2 and 3) Functions C and C’ (the decision to act and the beginning of action to resolve a function-A disruption and potentially establish a new equilibrium)

(4 and 5) Functions H and I or Ineg (the primary action to
resolve a function-A disruption, and its successful or unsuccessful conclusion)

*New Equilibrium*

In a complete sequence, a C-actant responds to a function-A or function-a situation by deciding to undertake action (function C) that begins (function C'), continues (function H), and concludes (function I or Ineg). Just as these functions lead logically from one situation to the next, in narratives that include events which one or more of the additional functions interpret, those functions too contribute to the logical progression. In the next section we will look at examples of all ten functions, and consider the kinds of information that an analysis of the function of events can uncover, even in a very short and relatively simple narrative.

The following story is one of the shorter ones in Jack Zipes’s fine translation of the stories collected by the Brothers Grimm. Titled only “A Third Tale” (in a group of stories about elves), it provides a relatively straightforward example to explore readers’ interpretations of the key moments and to begin to consider the usefulness of the additional functions.

The elves had stolen a mother’s child from the cradle and had replaced the baby with a changeling who had a fat head and glaring eyes and would do nothing but eat and drink. In her distress the mother went to her neighbor and asked for advice. The neighbor told her to carry the changeling into the kitchen, put him down on the hearth, start a fire, and boil water in two eggshells. That would make the changeling laugh, and when he laughed, he would lose his power. The woman did everything the neighbor said, and when she put the eggshells filled with water on the fire, the blockhead said:

“Now I’m as old as the Westerwald, and in all my life I’ve never seen eggshells cooked as these have been.”

And the changeling began to laugh. As soon as he laughed,
a bunch of elves appeared. They had brought the right child with them and put him down on the hearth and took the changeling away. (I, 166)

Judging by the response of the students with whom I have read this story, most readers interpret the theft of the child (and the arrival of the changeling) as a disruptive event (function A), and the return of the child (and the removal of the changeling) as a successful resolution (function I) that will establish a new equilibrium.

Once we recognize that the story begins with a disruptive function-A event, readers who are thinking about Todorov’s cyclical sequence or my sequence of functions will recognize that no prior equilibrium is represented. The story could have begun, after all, with a statement such as this: “Throughout the first winter after the baby’s birth, mother and child lived in great contentment. Then one day, the elves stole the mother’s child and replaced it with a changeling.” Similarly, the story concludes by indicating that the disruptive situation is successfully resolved (function I: the child is returned), but without representing a resultant equilibrium—even by including the familiar words “and they all lived happily ever after.”

This story gives us no glimpse of the narrative world (the world in which the characters act and interact) either prior to the theft of the baby or after the baby’s return. The effect of information that is not included in a story is a topic to which I will return repeatedly in this book. Here, let me suggest that even in this tiny story the lack of representation of prior and subsequent periods of equilibrium can affect readers’ experience. If readers were shown mother and child during a happy period before and after the events represented in the story, they might think more about the emotional impact for the mother of the theft of the child and the child’s return, might thus care more that the child is returned, and might even read more analytically to ascertain how and by whom the return of the child was accomplished.

When I ask my students, they disagree about which character, the mother or the neighbor, is the C-actant: the character who decides to act to try to alleviate the function-A situation and, in this story, whose motivated actions successfully get the baby returned. Initially, as many students credit the neighbor as the mother. Functions provide a vocabulary to talk about what our interpretations of agency may mean. To demonstrate, I draw examples from the familiar plots about knights and princesses and dragons, where agency, like right and wrong, is rarely ambiguous.
A dragon carries off a princess (function A). These three patterns of response are common:

(1) The knight whom the princess is to marry catches sight of her in the clutches of the dragon. He leaps on his horse and follows.

In this example, the knight is the C-actant who immediately decides (function C) to save the princess and sets off in pursuit (function C'). (Function C is the pivot that connects the motivating event I call function A to the beginning of the action it motivates, function C'. The move from C to C' marks the important step from deciding to act to beginning to act.)

(2) The king sees his daughter in the clutches of the dragon. He asks his best knight to save the princess. The knight agrees and rides off.

In this example, the king’s request that someone else—the knight—perform the primary action to resolve the disruption is an example of function B. The knight, as in the previous example, is the C-actant who performs function C (decides to save the princess) and function C' (rides off to save the princess). In the previous example, no function-B event is necessary to forward the plot because the knight already has sufficient motivation to take on the C-actant role (he is to marry the princess) and already knows that a function-A event has occurred (he sees the princess in the dragon’s clutches).

(3a) The knight either sees the princess in the clutches of the dragon or is asked by the king to save her. He decides to save her (function C). But his horse is lame, so the knight takes off on foot (function C'). Just down the road he meets a frog, who asks to be carried to a nearby pond (function D; the C-actant is tested). The knight carries the frog to the pond (function E; the C-actant responds to the test). Immediately the frog turns into a winged horse that offers to carry the knight in pursuit of the dragon
(function F; the C-actant acquires a form of empowerment he lacks and will need to achieve his goal).

(3b) Or, without a horse (as above), the knight takes off on foot (function C'). Just down the road he meets a winged horse that offers to take him in pursuit of the dragon (function F). In this case without having to earn it, the C-actant acquires a needed form of empowerment.

In the Grimms’ story about the baby who is carried off by elves, the mother responds to the baby’s disappearance by going to her neighbor and asking for advice—the event that is reported in the second sentence. In determining whether the mother or the neighbor is the C-actant, the core issue is how to interpret this event in relation to the other events that the story reports. Is the mother’s request comparable logically to the king’s request to the knight, in example 2 above, or to the knight’s taking off after the dragon on foot, in example 3?

If we say that the mother’s going to her neighbor and asking for advice is comparable to the king’s request to the knight, we are interpreting the mother’s action as function B. That is, we are indicating that the mother’s role in forwarding the plot is to bring the problem to the attention of her neighbor and ask for her neighbor’s help. If that is the extent of the mother’s role, then the primary action that leads to resolving the function-A theft of the baby is done by the neighbor, and in that case the neighbor is the C-actant (the C-actant is the character who performs function C).

If we say that the mother’s going to her neighbor and asking for advice is comparable to the knight’s taking off after the dragon on foot, we are interpreting the mother’s action as function C’. That is, we are indicating that we think that the mother has made a decision to try to save her baby (even though the story does not report in so many words that she makes a decision), and that going to ask her neighbor for advice is the mother’s first step toward carrying out that decision. According to this interpretation, the mother is the C-actant (the character who performs function C). The neighbor is the donor. Like the frog (in example 3a above) who empowers the knight by turning into a winged horse, the neighbor empowers the mother by giving her advice (function F) so that the mother can do what needs to be done to get the baby back (function H). When the baby returns, we know that the mother has succeeded (function I).
Retrospectively, after discussing the story, my students generally opt for the second interpretation—that the mother, rather than the neighbor, is the C-actant. The following sequence of functions represents, I suggest, most readers’ considered interpretations:

A  baby is carried off and replaced by a changeling (disruptive event)
[C] mother decides to try to save baby (C-actant’s decision, inferred)
C’ mother goes to neighbor and asks for advice (C-actant’s initial act)
F  neighbor gives mother the information she needs (empowering the mother)
G  mother brings changeling into the kitchen (the scene of the primary action)
H  mother boils water in two eggshells (the primary action)
I  baby is returned and the changeling taken away (success)

Function G, which has not previously been introduced, is self-explanatory. Function C is in brackets to indicate that the act it interprets is not reported in the text, but inferred by readers. Since function C is the crucial link between the motivating event (function A or a) and the actions it motivates (function C’ and function H), I like to indicate function C when we infer it. In narratives that explore characters’ mental acts, a function-C decision is often reported explicitly, in so many words. In response to narratives that report only the actions that can be seen by someone who is watching—and, often, in response to events in our world—whenever we interpret someone’s act as motivated, we are inferring that the actor has made a function-C decision that causally links the act to an existing situation it is to alleviate.

After thinking about a relatively simple story like this one, readers will almost always agree on interpretations of the causal relations among the primary events. Even so, the vocabulary of functions brings precision to discussions of issues such as heroism (does heroism require action? motivation? are all heroes C-actants?); knowledge (is knowledge a body of information? the ability to acquire the information or skill or tool one needs?); the comparative value of knowledge and action (is knowing how to get rid of a changeling more or less valuable than the act of boiling water in eggs?)—all of which are issues that can be historicized
or considered in relation to the culture they reflect. Throughout this book, however, I will be drawing attention to ways that events lend themselves to more than one interpretation of their function, and ways that a representation—for novels and stories, the words of the text—unavoidably (whether correctly or incorrectly, intentionally or not) guides readers’ interpretations of the function of the represented events.

In the Grimms’ story, for instance, the words went and asked (in the second sentence) may suggest divergent interpretations. The verb to ask, after all, is the word most commonly used in English to denote a request for help. In a context in which most readers will not be able to imagine that the mother herself will be able to effect the baby’s return, her act of asking can easily be misinterpreted as a request for help (comparable to asking a neighbor to use his own hammer—to be the C-actant and make something), rather than as a request for empowerment (comparable to asking a neighbor to lend his hammer—to the C-actant, so that the C-actant can make something). The verb to go, on the other hand, draws attention to someone’s physical movement, in this case the mother’s. For readers who have come to recognize, from the many narratives they have previously read, that mention of a character’s change of position or preparations to change position often signals that character’s adoption of the C-actant role (got on his horse, put on her shoes, ran to the street), the information that the mother went to her neighbor may suggest that the mother is taking on the C-actant role.

Language is also a way in which narratives guide readers to adopt a given character’s perspective. Here, for instance, the baby is initially described as “a mother’s child.” Since all babies (at least initially) have mothers, the effect of the word mother’s is not to add information about the baby but to align readers’ perspective and thus sympathy with the mother whose baby is lost. Other ways that this story guides readers to share the mother’s experience are the withholding by the narrator of everyone’s motivations except the mother’s (“In her distress”), and the selection by the narrator of the moment at which readers are introduced to the narrative world. Because the theft of the baby is presented at the beginning of the story as a fait accompli, as it seems to have been for the mother when she discovered it, readers share with the mother the experience of confronting a changeling in place of her child. In these diverse ways, even this brief story guides readers to consider the reported events from the mother’s perspective and thus to interpret the function of events as the mother does: that
the loss of the baby is a primary function—a disruptive event that must be alleviated, and that the return of the baby marks a successful resolution of the situation.

At the beginning of this chapter I introduced the definition of narrative I use: a sequential representation of sequential events. I call the sequential representation a representation, and the sequential events (once chronologically ordered) a fabula. The words of a text, the perspective from which the reported events are shown to readers (listeners, viewers), and how much and what kind of information is revealed or withheld (for instance, about characters’ feelings) are aspects of the representation. A fabula includes the events that a representation either explicitly represents as having occurred or provides information that permits a reader (listener, viewer) to deduce as having occurred. A fabula—as I define the term—is made by readers (listeners, viewers) from information found in a representation, or from information perceived in our world. Readers (listeners, viewers) make a fabula by assembling in chronological sequence the events they discern in a representation.

The fabula we make from the Grimms’ story contains basically only four events.

1. The baby is stolen and the changeling left in its place.
2. The mother talks to the neighbor.
3. The mother makes the changeling laugh.
4. The baby is returned and the changeling taken away.

Now let us imagine a different representation of these four events—told this time from the perspective of the elves and including additional information known to the elves. In a story that I am imagining, one day the Queen of the elves confides to her most powerful minister how much she longs for a human baby to raise as her own child and heir. The minister, wanting to please her and to stabilize the kingdom by ensuring an heir, steals a baby, leaving a changeling in its place, and brings the baby to the Queen. The Queen is so pleased that she rewards the minister by naming him the baby’s tutor and sets the date for a ceremony to name the baby her heir apparent—when, suddenly the baby disappears from the royal nursery and a changeling is found in its place.

Readers of this representation that I am imagining will interpret the events it shares with the Grimms’ story very differently than they do when they consider those events in the context of the Grimms’ story.
a minister learns that Queen longs for a baby and heir
   (lower-case a represents a reevaluation of an otherwise unchanged situation)
C minister decides to find a baby for the Queen
C' minister sets out to find a baby
G minister arrives at a house with a baby
H minister steals the baby and leaves a changeling in its place
I minister brings baby to Queen
EQ Queen has a baby; minister is rewarded; the kingdom has an heir
A baby disappears; Queen is distraught; her people are in turmoil over the succession

The events that in my imagined story express the motivating function a (the Queen’s desire for a baby and the Elven kingdom’s need for an heir) are not included in the story the Grimms collected, which does not explain the elves’ motivation. That story begins with the report of the theft of the baby, which we interpret as function A in that story and as function H in my imagined story. In my imagined story, the mother’s actions are not known; only their effect is apparent: the return of the baby. In the Grimms’ story, which is told from the perspective of the mother, the baby’s return is interpreted by the mother and by readers as function I: the successful result of a motivated action. But to the Queen and the Elven kingdom, the baby’s return to its mother is a catastrophic loss that leaves Queen and kingdom seriously disrupted.

We see here examples of functional polyvalence that demonstrate how radically interpretations of a given event can vary, depending on the perspective from which the event is perceived and the other events and situations in relation to which it is interpreted. We interpret one event (the theft of the baby) as function A in the Grimms’ story and function H in my imagined story, and another event (the return of the baby) as function I in the Grimms’ story and as function A in my imagined story. Moreover, the meaning of an event is subject to interpretations that can vary for people in our world as well as for characters in fictional worlds, and also for readers (listeners, viewers). But the consequences of interpretations are not the same for readers (listeners, viewers) of fictional narratives as they are for characters in fictional worlds and people in our world.

In the fictional world that the Grimms’ story represents, the
elves steal a child. Since theft is a purposeful act, it seems fair to assume that the elves acted purposefully (even if only to amuse themselves, or to pester humans), and succeeded. Their success, we know, is the mother’s traumatic loss, which motivates her action. Her success may then reverse whatever the theft of the child accomplished for the elves. A feud, in our world or in a fictional world, illustrates the degree to which, in life as in fiction, one person’s or character’s successful reestablishment of an equilibrium can be interpreted by another person or character as a disruptive event that motivates further action. In fictional worlds and in our world, functional polyvalence is a motor that can generate action and endless reaction. When we stop to reflect, everyone who has acquired narrative competence understands that this is the case.

Readers of the Grimms’ story, however, customarily adopt the mother’s—rather than the elves’—interpretation of the theft of the child: that it is a traumatic loss that must be reversed at all costs. Presumably we interpret the events as the mother does in part because we think of the mother and baby as of our species, and of the bond between mother and baby as sacrosanct. But part of our response is determined by aspects of the representation: the alignment of the information we receive with the information the mother receives, and the withholding of information about everyone’s motivation except the mother’s. Even this tiny story not only tells us about something that happened but also, subtly but surely, guides our interpretation of the events it reports.

For readers (listeners, viewers) of fictional narratives, being guided to interpret the reported events from one perspective rather than another does not lead us to undertake action in the fictional world, because the ontological boundary makes that impossible. But because fictional narratives offer reports of narrative worlds about which the available information is finite, fiction offers an ideal laboratory for analyzing the ways in which narrative representations shape the events they report. The vocabulary of functions brings a new specificity to studies that show that—and how—narratives shape interpretations. Understanding how fictional narratives shape our interpretations of reported events can make us more competent readers of narratives that report events in our world (in response to which we may need to act, or to refrain from acting), and more competent interpreters of the events we observe in our world (in response to which we may need to decide whether to intervene).
The one narrative we have analyzed thus far—the Grimms’ story—traces a path from function A to function I. Some narratives trace paths that include a number of sequences, some just one, some less than one. There is no necessary correlation between the length of a narrative and the number of sequences its path traces. A comparison of two generic forms of the novel, the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque novel, will show this, and will show one of the ways that paths from one equilibrium to another equilibrium vary.

A *Bildungsroman* (a novel about a character’s development into adulthood) begins at a point where the protagonist (the main character), while still young, begins to be aware of herself as an individual in a world that includes other individuals, and traces that character’s development to a point that she interprets as the milestone marking her entrance into the adult life for which she has been preparing: entrance to a career, earning enough money to be able to contribute to her younger siblings’ education, getting married, etc. The path that a *Bildungsroman* traces, typically, is a single sequence that includes numerous recurrences of the donor events (functions D, E, and F), each of which provides for the protagonist experiences that allow her to develop the qualifications or attributes she needs to become the person she wants to be.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EQ</th>
<th>protagonist is comfortable in her world</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>protagonist becomes aware that she lacks attributes or qualifications she will need to accomplish her goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>protagonist decides to try to become the person she wants to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C'</td>
<td>protagonist takes first steps (sits down to study, requests a college catalog, goes to batting practice, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(D E F)n</td>
<td>again and again, protagonist is challenged, meets challenge, and develops in ways that help her become a person who can accomplish her goals [I use the superscript ‘n’ to indicate that this series of events is repeated an indeterminate number of times.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>protagonist reaches time and place of milestone event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>milestone event: protagonist plays in the finals at Wimbledon, becomes a partner in a prestigious law firm, gets married, hands parents a check, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>protagonist has achieved her goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQ</td>
<td>equilibrium is reestablished</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In a *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist has many experiences, all of which contribute to and enable reaching the long-term goal of becoming someone with a certain set of qualifications and attributes. A reader’s interest tends to be focused on how the protagonist’s experiences are changing her and helping her become a person who can accomplish her goals.

In contrast, a *picaresque* novel follows a protagonist (the *picaro*, or rogue) who proceeds from adventure to adventure, and from place to place. Often described as “episodic,” a picaresque novel typically moves from episode to episode, or, in my terms, traces a path that moves along one sequence, and then another and another sequence. Typically, the protagonist arrives in a town where he is unknown. Taking advantage of his anonymity, he engages in mildly illegal or inappropriate behavior that brings him something that he enjoys, and then he is punished. Perhaps he steals a flask of wine, or orders in a tavern a meal that he cannot pay for, or seduces a woman who is willing but married. The pleasant situation that he is enjoying (EQ) is disrupted by the townspeople’s attempts to punish him. Perhaps he is put in prison, or the tavern-keeper or the woman’s husband grabs a cudgel and chases after him (function A). He decides to save himself (function C), then, for instance, escapes from jail or hides under a barrel (function C’), and finally gets away (function H), perhaps by stealing a horse, or hiding in a cart that is headed to another town.

The protagonist’s success in getting away and reaching a town where he is unknown (function I) allows him to take advantage of his anonymity to engage in behavior that brings him something he enjoys (EQ), for which he is punished (function A). Again he escapes to another town (functions C, C’, H, I) where he takes advantage of his anonymity to engage in behavior that brings him pleasure (EQ). Each new town brings the anonymity that the protagonist needs to engage in behavior that brings him pleasure; each time he is punished (function A), initiating a new sequence. The protagonist of a picaresque novel—unlike the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*—typically does not develop his abilities as a result of his experiences. Instead, in each new town he engages in reckless actions to fulfill his immediate desires, and, when punishment is threatened, he displays the same quick strategy-planning and physical agility to escape to a new town. A reader’s interest tends to be focused on the protagonist’s audacity, the variety of the situations in which he becomes embroiled, and his skill in escaping an often well-deserved punishment.
Described generically, the two patterns are readily distinguished and depict contrasting personality types. Analyzed from a global perspective, a picaresque novel traces a path that includes many sequences, while a full-length *Bildungsroman* includes only one sequence. In a picaresque novel, although the protagonist engages in new experiences from sequence to sequence, he does not fundamentally change. In the *Bildungsroman*, with its single sequence that includes multiple occurrences of the donor functions (D, E, and F), the protagonist’s experiences contribute to a personal development (intellectual, physical, moral, etc.) that enables meeting some larger teleological goal. (The *Bildungsroman*, not surprisingly, is the newer form, its origins generally ascribed to a late-eighteenth-century novel, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*.)

In practice, however, the distinction between the two forms can become a matter of interpretation. For instance, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* has been categorized by some critics as a picaresque novel and by other critics as a parody of picaresque novels. Like the picaresque rogue, Cervantes’s knight falls into one problematic adventure after another, without there being any resultant fundamental change in his behavior or his view of the world. He rides from place to place, and in each place disrupts a stable situation (in the best-known example, by attacking a windmill)—a function A disruption—escapes punishment by riding away, or is punished by being chased away, to some other place. There he again undertakes action that disrupts a stable situation (function A), thus initiating a new sequence.

But the knight’s interpretation of what he is doing is quite different. From his perspective, in fact, his behavior is comparable to that of a character in a *Bildungsroman*. Imitating the knight-errants about whom he has read, Cervantes’s knight rides out (function C'), motivated by his lack of fame and fortune (function a) and with the intention (function C) of bettering the world, earning fame and honor, and thereby winning the attention of the woman he renames Dulcinea. His actions are not only well intentioned but subsumed to the larger goal. When he comes upon the windmill that to his eyes appears to be a giant, he interprets the situation as a test (function D), to which he responds courageously as a good knight must (function E), expecting to earn as a result honor and glory (function F). Each subsequent adventure, from his perspective, is a further test. The two interpretations of his courageous but disruptive interventions—as function E (his inter-
pretation) or function A—illustrate functional polyvalence. For readers, the greatness of the novel can be found in part in the tension between the two interpretations.

Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* provides an example of a somewhat different interpretive issue. The novel is generally considered an example of a *Bildungsroman* (or a *Künstlerroman*, the sub-type of *Bildungsroman* in which the protagonist’s goal is to become an artist). The protagonist Stephen Dedalus experiences a new set of problems in each chapter, and by the novel’s conclusion he has made the decision to leave home and devote himself to working as an artist. According to this interpretation, each chapter presents a test (function D) to which Stephen responds appropriately (function E) and thereby develops or reinforces attributes (function F) that will be of use to him in his larger purpose of becoming an artist. As satisfactory as this interpretation may seem from a global perspective (for instance, to a reader who has finished reading the novel, or to a reader who read the novel some months or years previously and remembers the general outline but not the details), during the process of reading, a first-time reader who does not know how the novel will conclude, or any reader who gets caught up in the immediate problem that Stephen faces in each chapter, is likely to think of each chapter as a separate sequence. In this interpretation, each chapter of Joyce’s *Portrait*, like each episode in a picaresque novel, introduces a new problem (function A), which Stephen thinks about and finally undertakes to resolve (functions C, C’, H).

As these two examples indicate, the shape and the number of sequences one discerns can vary from reader to reader and from reader to character. Among readers, interpretations of how many or how few sequences a given novel or story includes are probably more varied than interpretations of the function of a given event. Different reading and interpretive situations lend themselves at times to a global view (to see a novel as one extended sequence) and at times to recognizing local detail (an event as small as answering the telephone can be interpreted as an entire sequence that is initiated by the ringing, which creates a function-A disruption). Context matters; in certain contexts, even answering a telephone can effect global change. But a variation in interpretations of the shape and the number of sequences by no means invalidates the usefulness of analyzing the varying interpretations. On the contrary, subdividing a material is an important step in the process of understanding it. Analyzing the number of sequences that readers
discern, and locating the signposts that readers interpret as indications that a new sequence is beginning, offers a means to investigate the thought processes readers adopt in response to narratives.\(^{13}\)

In the only narrative form we have considered that includes multiple sequences (the picaresque novel), sequences follow one another sequentially, one after the other. When sequences are combined sequentially, either the event that resolves one sequence initiates a new sequence (the event that we interpret as function I we then reinterpret as function A), or, as in the picaresque novel, as soon as one sequence is resolved, some new event (that we interpret as function A) disrupts the incipient equilibrium and initiates a new sequence. Tzvetan Todorov recognized, both in his book on the *Decameron* (*Grammaire du Décaméron*, 68–69) and in his earlier analysis of the novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (“Les Catégories du récit littéraire,” 140–41), that there were three patterns in which multiple sequences could be represented in a linear medium like language, which listeners and readers can grasp only one word (sentence, paragraph) at a time. In addition to a *sequential* pattern in which one sequence is followed by another (“Enchaînement”), Todorov described patterns of *alternating* sequences (“Alternance”) and *embedded* sequences (“Enchâssement”).

In an alternating pattern, a segment of one sequence is followed by a segment of a second sequence, which is followed by another segment of the first sequence, and then another segment of the second sequence, and so on. A pattern of alternating sequences is often used to tell two characters’ stories occurring at different times (a daughter’s experiences as a teenager, her mother’s experiences as a teenager, the daughter’s experiences in her twenties, her mother’s experiences in her twenties, the daughter’s experiences in her thirties, her mother’s experiences in her thirties); two characters’ stories occurring at the same time (but perhaps in different cities); or one character’s experiences as an adult interspersed with that character’s experiences as a child. In Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*—considered from a global perspective—one sequence follows Anna’s and Vronsky’s developing relationship, and another sequence follows Kitty’s and Levin’s developing relationship. Throughout the novel, sections on Anna’s and Vronsky’s activities alternate with sections on Kitty’s and Levin’s activities.

In the third pattern, embedding, one sequence is included within another sequence: a segment of a first sequence (a framing sequence) is followed by an entire second sequence, after which
the first sequence (the framing sequence) concludes. In Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, all the stories that the pilgrims tell are embedded within the framing sequence. In the framing sequence, the tedium of riding silently is the motivating function—a situation. The group decision by the pilgrims to amuse themselves and relieve the tedium by telling stories is function C. (Since all the pilgrims decide to participate in the storytelling designed to relieve the function—a tedium, *The Canterbury Tales* offers an example of a joint C-actant, all of them working together to accomplish a common goal.) The pilgrims draw lots (function C’) to determine the order in which they will tell their stories. And then the Knight, who is selected as the first speaker, begins to tell his story (function H1), and one by one the other pilgrims tell their stories (H2, H3, H4, etc.). Generally, when a framing sequence represents a situation of storytelling, the embedded stories that characters tell express function H (the C-actant’s primary action) in the framing sequence.

The three patterns Todorov discerned are sometimes found in combination. In *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade’s stories, like Chaucer’s pilgrims’ stories, express function H in the framing sequence. (The king’s practice of requiring that a virgin be brought to him every evening, then executing her the next morning, expresses function A. Scheherazade decides—function C—to try to stop the practice, and begins to act—function C’—by arranging that her sister Dunyazade will be brought to the bedchamber and will ask Scheherazade to tell a story.) But many of the stories that Scheherazade tells also embed other stories, forming a pattern of a sequence in a sequence in a sequence.14 According to Todorov’s analysis of *Les liaisons dangereuses*, that novel includes two alternating sequences (the story of Tourvel and the story of Cecile), which are both embedded within the story of the couple Merteuil-Valmont (“Les Catégories du récit littéraire,” 140).

To conclude this first chapter that is intended to serve as an introduction to all the subsequent chapters, I return to the idea with which this chapter began: that *meaning* (in the sense that I use the term) is an interpretation of the causal relations between an event and the other events and situations one thinks of as related. Brian Richardson discerns the close relationship between interpretation and causality: “In many respects, interpretation and causality are two sides of the same coin. Confronted by multiple and mutually
exclusive explanatory options, characters and readers alike are impelled to weigh the evidence, take hermeneutical stands, and adjust prior expectations to meet anomalous incidents” (Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative, 43). It can be argued (it has been argued) that causality is an interpretation, and even that causality is an invention to give meaning to otherwise meaningless activities.15

In an early contribution to contemporary studies of historiography, “‘Plain’ and ‘Significant’ Narrative in History,” W. H. Walsh distinguishes between “description and elucidation,” between “establishing facts [and] establishing connections” (483), between “the chronicle [and] history proper,” or, in the terms he introduces, between “‘plain’ and ‘significant’ narrative in history” (479). Investigating, as he puts it, “in a provisional way, what the historian is concerned with and what he hopes to achieve” (479), Walsh considers:

the two possibilities that historical narrative might be “plain” or “significant.” The adjectives... (a) a description of the facts restricted to a straightforward statement of what occurred, (b) an account of them which brought out their connections. If historians were content with plain narrative they would, I thought, confine themselves to stating... “precisely what happened”; if their aim was rather to produce the sort of narrative I call “significant” they would seek to make clear not only what happened, but why it happened too. I had, and have, no doubt that the second alternative is correct. (480)

For Walsh, a “plain” historical narrative, like the chronicle, reports sequential events, and a “significant” historical narrative explores causal relations (“why it happened”) too.

As Walsh points out, not every narrative (a sequential representation of sequential events) includes indications of causality—although readers (listeners, viewers) will strive to locate causal relations, I suggest, and, failing to do so, will generally soon lose interest. Let us take as an example this short narrative:

John went to the party. While he was there he talked to Mary, Nancy, and Elizabeth, and then he went home.

Given only this information, we have no reason to think that a
prevailing situation has changed or is about to change. We can label the prevailing situation an equilibrium (EQ). Probably we are not very interested in John or Mary or Nancy or Elizabeth. Of course, if we happen to know that John suffers from agoraphobia (a function-A situation), we will interpret his attendance at the party as a motivated (function C) and successful (functions C', H, I) endeavor on his part to overcome his malady. Or if we learn that Elizabeth, when she was talking to John, told him that her husband, Ed, John’s best friend, had stayed home to try to repair the clogged drain in the kitchen sink, we may interpret John’s departure as function C’ and assume that he has gone to help Ed open the drain (function H). Or, if we find out that among the early guests at the party was John’s ex-wife, Frances, whom he had recently divorced, then we may interpret John’s arrival at the party—at least from Frances’s perspective—as a disruptive event (function A₁), exacerbated by his departure without speaking to her (function A₂). Any information that guides us to explore causal relations arguably makes a narrative more interesting as well as more meaningful.¹⁶

While Walsh recognizes that historical narratives may address either what happened or what happened and why it happened too, he calls for the latter procedure, deeming the combination of what and why “significant.” Similarly, the ability that readers (listeners, viewers) of narratives develop to make sense of a reported sequence of events—narrative competence—requires analyzing not only the chronological but also the causal relations among the reported events. The element that, according to Walsh, makes historical narrative “significant”—the connections between events—is the element that functions name. For historians, for individuals perceiving events in our world, for characters perceiving events in fictional worlds, and for readers (listeners, viewers) of narratives, meaning is an interpretation of the causal relations among a chronologically ordered sequence of events. Functions offer a uniform vocabulary to denote these interpretations—inside and outside of narratives, at any ontological level.

A uniform vocabulary permits comparisons that illuminate differences in interpretations. In studies of narratives and in analyses of events in the world, a vocabulary of functions offers a means to explore the functional polyvalence of events and to show the degree to which, even when events can be known, their meanings may diverge. In studies of narratives, a vocabulary of functions allows analysts (1) to compare and contrast perceivers’ and narrators’ and
characters’ interpretations of causal relations among events; (2) to trace when, and whether, shifts in interpretation occur in response to new information, whether by perceivers, characters, or narrators; (3) to analyze and contrast the varying patterns of sequences and of key and additional functions in sequences that specific narratives take; and (4), most broadly, to investigate the ways in which narratives by representing events in a context inevitably shape interpretations of those events.

Narrative studies is a mature discipline that has developed a broad and sophisticated body of work to elucidate narrative as a mode of communication, and to analyze how individual narratives communicate. My theory of functions focuses on only one aspect of narrative communication—how interpretations of causality vary and how representations shape interpretations of causality—and can complement, but certainly not replace, other approaches to narrative analysis. Admittedly, too, there are nuances to causal relations that a vocabulary of ten functions cannot represent. In addition, I have selected the ten functions I define because of their recurrence in mainly nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives from Western cultures. I have looked at the causal relations in narratives from other cultures and eras only enough to ascertain that, in certain cases, patterns that differ from the range of patterns I analyze in this book will sometimes be found. The ten functions, however, I think can be used to express those differences. Even more problematic is that any terminology, once introduced, can shape not only expression but thought. Functions nonetheless provide a powerful tool to explore interpretations of events perceived sequentially, and the shaping of those interpretations by sequential representation.