Narrative Causalities

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Kafalenos, Emma.
Narrative Causalities.
The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
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CHAPTER 5

LINGERING AT FUNCTIONS D, E, AND F:

James’s *The Ambassadors* and Kafka’s “Before the Law”

Life, including life for those who live it as characters in a narrative, is more difficult to interpret than narratives are for readers. In chapter 4 I investigate, as one aspect of the importance of indications of function C, their value as a hermeneutic device—a lodestar—to guide interpretations of where one is in a logical sequence. In a narrative, as we saw, a function-C decision must sometimes be surmised from its consequences, but is sometimes reported by a narrator with knowledge of a character’s thoughts. For people in our world and for characters in fictional worlds, however, no one but a C-actant herself can know what decisions she has made, unless or until she reveals them through speech or action. Another reason that life is more difficult to interpret than narratives is that the beginning and the conclusion of a narrative sequence are more difficult to discern when the sequence is not packaged between the covers of a book.

A narrative sequence—the movement from an equilibrium (EQ), through a period of imbalance (in my terms a function-A situation), to another equilibrium (EQ)—is a pattern as useful for interpreting events in our world as for interpreting events in narratives. But for events in our world, it is difficult to obtain a sufficiently broad temporal perspective to be able to gauge with any accuracy where an individual sequence begins and ends. Narratives, on the other hand, whether they include one sequence or more than one sequence, generally begin at one of two positions in a sequence—at an initial equilibrium or at a disruptive moment near the onset of a period of imbalance—and conclude at or near the end of a sequence when equilibrium has been regained.
or seems about to be regained. Experienced readers (listeners, viewers) of narratives grow accustomed to this pattern and tend to rely on it, although generally not consciously, to locate where they are when they initially begin to read (listen, view). In certain modern novels and stories, however, the representation—and sometimes the fabula too—begins at a later point in the sequence and does not reach a concluding equilibrium. These narratives include in the representation only a part of the path from equilibrium to imbalance to equilibrium; they contain even less than one complete narrative sequence. Interpreting the function of events in representations that trace so short a path is sometimes nearly as difficult as interpreting the function of events in our world—where we are left to determine which events to include in a sequence without the guidance of novelist, playwright, or historian.

In Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* (published in 1903) and Franz Kafka’s “Vor dem Gesetz” (“Before the Law”; published in 1919), the initial event in the representation is the arrival of the protagonist at a destination to which he has traveled. For both James’s Strether and Kafka’s man from the country, the arrival with which the narrative begins marks the completion of a journey motivated by a prior disruptive event: both protagonists have already traveled to the one place where it may be possible to alleviate a troublesome situation that the earlier disruptive event has caused. These narratives contain less than one complete narrative sequence; they begin long after the onset of imbalance and linger along the narrative path, extending the few functions they contain to fill an entire text.

For readers, an incomplete narrative sequence creates false clues that initially lead us astray as we attempt to determine the function of the narrated events. The effects of this structural “red herring” are supported by the disjuncture, in these and other narratives, including many by James and Kafka, between the narrative voice that speaks and the focalizer that perceives and conceives. Like the protagonists who misread the function of their acts, readers who are permitted to see only through the protagonists’ focalization misread the function of events. Misled by the book covers, or by the paratextual signs that indicate the beginning of a story, readers who expect the opening section of a narrative to coincide with a period of equilibrium or the moment of its disruption often interpret an event initially as an expression of one function, and then later reinterpret the same event as an expression of a different function. Readers of these narratives by Kafka and James repeatedly reinterpret the function of events as they read, continuing to shift their interpretations even in
response to the events with which the two narratives conclude. After analyzing these interpretations and reinterpretations, first in James’s novel and then in Kafka’s story, in the final section of this chapter I consider the relation between the incomplete sequence and a Modernist epistemological doubt that, like the protagonists, readers of these two narratives experience.

Because Strether, in the opening pages of *The Ambassadors*, is so obviously enjoying the first days after his arrival in Europe, readers who know from experience that narratives tend to begin either at a period of equilibrium (EQ) just before it is disrupted, or at a moment of disruption that marks the onset of imbalance (function A or function a), initially interpret the opening scene as an equilibrium and expect a disruptive function-A event to occur. James’s first sentence both responds to and defers this expectation: “Strether’s first question, when he reached the hotel, was about his friend; yet on learning that Waymarsh was apparently not to arrive till evening he was not wholly disconcerted” (James, 21: 3). Because Strether is not “disconcerted,” we understand that Waymarsh’s delay is not the function-A event we anticipate.

(James: fabula 1)

EQ Strether’s joy during his first days in Europe
A  not Waymarsh’s delay, but some other disruptive event

So we read on to find a disruptive event, only to discover that one has already occurred and that Strether has come to Europe, at Mrs. Newsome’s request, to rectify it: to remove her son Chad from the arms of a foreign woman and send him back to Woollett to the bride his mother has chosen.

In discovering that Strether has come to Europe to bring Chad home and that Chad’s liaison is the function-A situation that has disrupted the equilibrium in Woollett, we are engaging in the process of constructing the novel’s fabula, the chronological account that readers organize in response to the representation that we read. The initial events of the fabula of *The Ambassadors* include the details that the representation slowly reveals about Strether’s life during the period of presumed equilibrium in Woollett that the news of Chad’s liaison disrupts. The initial event
in the novel’s representation is Strether’s request for information about whether Waymarsh has arrived at the hotel in Chester: the event that the first sentence addresses. Because functions name interpretations of the causes and consequences of events in the sequence in which the events are perceived, the vocabulary of functions enables discussing and comparing interpretations of events in the developing fabulas one constructs during the process of reading, and between a complete fabula and its representation.

Once we have established Chad’s liaison as a function-A event in the fabula that is being revealed, we can interpret the events it motivates that precede Strether’s question about Waymarsh, the first event in the representation. We probably interpret Mrs. Newsome’s request to Strether to bring Chad back as function B. Strether’s decision (function C) to attempt to alleviate the disruptive situation by retrieving Chad marks the moment of his assumption of the C-actant role. As his first act (function C’), he sets sail for Europe. This reading is supported, even indicated, by the vocabulary choices James’s characters make. Strether tells Waymarsh, “‘I’ve come . . . on [Mrs. Newsome’s] business’” (21: 32). Maria Gostrey summarizes Strether’s situation: “‘You’ve accepted the mission of separating [Mr. Chad] from the wicked woman’” (21: 54).

Once we have read far enough to discern and to interpret these events that in fabula precede Strether’s arrival in Europe, we will need to reinterpret the initial event in the representation. With the information we now have, we can no longer interpret Strether’s first days in Europe as an unbroken equilibrium; we can consider the opening events as, at best, a period of temporary relaxation prior to the resumption of an extended, ongoing effort. Thus the function of the opening scene shifts, for readers, from opening equilibrium to momentary stasis immediately prior to primary action. If we interpret Strether’s arrival in Europe as function G, we are indicating that we assume that Strether is the C-actant, the agent for change, and that he has arrived at the locus of his primary endeavor (function H), which is about to begin. (Brackets indicate interpretations of events that precede chronologically the initial event in the representation.)

(James: fabula 2)

[EQ] equilibrium in Woollett
[A] Chad’s liaison becomes known in Woollett
[B] Mrs. Newsome asks Strether to bring Chad back to Woollett
If we understand Strether’s arrival in Europe as function G, however, as we read on we will be forced to reinterpret the initial scene once again, this time as a result of what we learn about the relationship that develops between Strether and Maria Gostrey, during the time they spend together while they are still in England. At whatever point in our reading we recognize the degree of importance Strether attaches to Maria Gostrey’s offer to assist him—her promise, at the conclusion of their last meeting before both of them travel to Paris, that he will succeed in his mission and that “to that end I’m yours” (21: 75)—this information guides us in interpreting her promise as function F, an event that empowers Strether in his further action. If her promise is function F, then function G—Strether’s arrival at the locus of his primary action—is expressed by his arrival in Paris. In this context we interpret the initial scene in the representation for the third time, shifting our interpretation from (1) opening equilibrium to (2) function G to (3) a quiet moment that precedes the events of function D. (Again, brackets indicate interpretations of events that precede chronologically the initial event in the representation.)

(James: fabula 3)

[EQ] equilibrium in Woollett
[A] Chad’s liaison becomes known in Woollett
[B] Mrs. Newsome asks Strether to bring Chad back to Woollett
[C] Strether decides to attempt to bring Chad back
[C’] Strether sails to Europe
[D] Strether is tested by Maria Gostrey, who introduces herself to him to discover whether she likes him as much as she thinks she will
[E] Strether responds to Europe and to Maria Gostrey
[F] Maria Gostrey’s offer of help empowers Strether
[G] Strether arrives in Paris
[H] Strether’s primary actions to return Chad to Woollett

By interpreting Maria Gostrey’s promise of assistance as function F, a preliminary event that empowers Strether in his primary
endeavor to convince Chad to return to Woollett, we are distinguishing between preliminary and primary actions. Functions D-E-F represent preliminary events that empower the C-actant to accomplish a later and more important goal. Function H represents the primary actions to alleviate a motivating function A. By interpreting Strether’s efforts to return Chad to Woollett as function H, we are saying that we consider Strether’s actions in France as the primary endeavor of the narrative sequence.

Although the moment in the process of reading at which different readers interpret and reinterpret events as functions undoubtedly varies to some extent from reader to reader, most readers, I suggest, as they read Book Third (the sixth and seventh chapters of the novel) if not earlier, will reach an interpretation of the functions of the primary events in the fabula that is in accordance with the function analysis represented above—an interpretation that is unlikely to change until one reaches the concluding chapter 36. Certainly, as we read on, we become aware that the information we are given concerns Strether’s thoughts more often than his actions. Moreover, the focalization permits us to watch Strether’s growing approval of the changes he perceives in Chad, and to see that he attributes those changes to the beneficial influence of Mme. de Vionnet. As a result, any reader must wonder whether Strether will continue to attempt to carry out his function-C mission of returning Chad to Woollett, and even whether Strether will be able to complete the mission if he chooses to do so. In other words, as we read on, we become increasingly aware of the question of whether Strether will succeed (function I) or fail (function I_{neg}). But in part because of our attention to this issue, readers who are as satisfied with the interpretation represented above (fabula 3) as I think most are, will continue to interpret the events that are revealed as those of Strether’s primary endeavor (function H), even until they reach the final pages.

The novel’s conclusion, however, forces readers to reconsider their earlier interpretations of events as functions, this time in light of their consequences. Even the initial question of success or failure is no easy matter to resolve. With Chad still in France we cannot label Strether’s efforts a success (function I). Nor, as we listen to Strether as he appeals to Chad “by all you hold sacred” (22: 311) not to abandon his liaison with Mme. de Vionnet, can we label Chad’s continued presence in France as Strether’s failure (function I_{neg}) to accomplish his goal. The difficulty in interpreting the problematic ending of this novel, however, exceeds the mere
inability to determine success or failure. I cite the decisive words in the final conversation between Strether and Maria Gostrey. Strether has understood that what she is offering “was as the offer of exquisite service, of lightened care, for the rest of his days”:

“I know. I know. But all the same I must go.” He had got it at last. “To be right.”
“To be right?”
She had echoed it in vague deprecation, but he felt it already clear for her. “That, you see, is my only logic. Not, out of the whole affair, to have got anything for myself.”
She thought. “But, with your wonderful impressions, you’ll have got a great deal.”
“A great deal”—he agreed. “But nothing like you. It’s you who would make me wrong! (22: 325–26; James’s emphasis)

According to the logic of this passage as I read it, both characters agree that Strether has gained, with his “wonderful impressions,” much from his experiences, while Strether feels that to accept Maria Gostrey’s offer would be to behave in a way that would “make [him] wrong.” In terms of a function analysis, this passage confirms that the change that has occurred is not in Chad’s situation but in Strether himself. We reinterpret the events in Paris as a series of tests for Strether (function D), to which he responds admirably (function E), and thereby acquires extraordinary powers of perception (function F). If we accept Strether’s logic, we understand the novel’s concluding scene as he does: that since he has not accomplished a primary action (function H), he can accept neither the reward for success (function I) that Maria Gostrey offers, nor the equilibrium (EQ) that remaining with her would establish.

Readers who interpret the concluding scene according to Strether’s logic will reinterpret the primary events of the novel as a whole, after they finish their reading, according to this sequence of functions:

(James: the complete fabula)

EQ equilibrium in Woollett
[A] Chad’s liaison becomes known in Woollett
[B] Mrs. Newsome asks Strether to bring Chad back to Woollett
[C] Strether decides to attempt to bring Chad back
[C'] Strether sails to Europe
D Strether is tested by his experiences in Europe
E Strether has “wonderful impressions”
F Strether’s empowerment consists of becoming a more complete human being who has learned to understand complex situations

According to the interpretation this sequence of functions represents, the single narrative sequence of the novel’s fabula is incomplete. It stops at function F; Strether is preparing to leave Paris, and the equilibrium in Woollett is not restored. A complete sequence would require a set of events to fill several additional functions: for example, arriving somewhere (function G), Strether undertakes a primary endeavor (function H), succeeds or fails (function I or I$_{neg}$), and lives happily or dies (EQ). James’s suppression of the events to fill these functions creates an ending that represents a Modern view of a protagonist’s chances for success. Strether neither wins nor loses, neither lives happily nor dies. Life goes on, and consolation consists in recognizing one’s personal growth (function F).

In the representation, moreover, the initial event is Strether’s arrival in Europe, an event that occurs after the bracketed events that in fabula fill functions A, B, C, and C’. The path of the representation is cut off at both ends. By designing the novel’s representation so that its initial event occurs after the event that fills function C’, and by suppressing all further events after those that express function F, James constructs a representation that effectively traces only three functions. It lingers, for hundreds of pages, at functions D, E, and F.

*(James: representation)*

D Strether is tested by his experiences in Europe
E Strether has “wonderful impressions”
F Strether’s empowerment consists of becoming a more complete human being who has learned to understand complex situations

The postponement in the representation of the events that fill functions A to C’, which are revealed only gradually as the representation progresses, creates the shifting interpretations of the function
of the opening event that I have traced. The suppression in both the fabula and the representation of events to complete the sequence is responsible for our failing to recognize until the final chapter that the set of events in Paris is not the primary endeavor of a function H, but, instead, the subordinate preparatory events of functions D-E-F that are designed to empower a protagonist to accomplish a later, more important endeavor that can be interpreted as a function H. Inherent to the cutting off of events at the beginning and the end of a representation is the creation of false clues. Readers misinterpret the function of events because they are accustomed to relying on the position of an event in a sequence as an indication of its function. Since readers bring these expectations to their reading, a representation that begins after a function-A disruption and does not include a function-C decision (which, as I argue in chapter 4, provides hermeneutic comfort) leads us astray—even if the events that express function A and function C are revealed, as they are in The Ambassadors, in the course of the novel.

The shifts in interpretation that the representation’s incomplete narrative sequence demands of readers are supported by the separation between narrative voice and focalization. A first-person narration raises epistemological questions that an anonymous third-person narration does not. Readers know from experience that when first-person narrators speak, the information they convey cannot exceed what one mind can know and can rarely if ever escape the (dis)coloration of subjectivity. A third-person narration raises doubts such as these more subtly, if at all. For the voice to speak in the third person, I suggest, encourages readers to trust the information it conveys, even when that information is subjectively colored, as it is in The Ambassadors where the focalization is restricted to Strether’s perceptions and conceptions. It is at least in part because we trust Strether more than we would if he spoke to us directly in the first person, I suggest, that we are willing to adopt his interpretation of the function of his acts, again and again, as our guide in interpreting his behavior.

The degree to which we give credence to Strether’s focalization can be illustrated by a comparison of our interpretations, as readers, to Maria Gostrey’s interpretations. Because Maria Gostrey is a character, she is on Strether’s ontological level, and can hear him speak but cannot hear the narrator. She is Strether’s narratee, whereas readers share the situation of the novel’s narratee, who hears Strether through the filter of the narrator’s voice. Yet Maria Gostrey’s interpretation of the function of the events of Strether’s
life is identical to our own: “‘You’ve accepted the mission of separating him from the wicked woman’” (21: 54). Her words reveal her interpretation of the events of function A (‘wicked woman’), function B (‘accepted,’ which requires a prior request), and function C (both “accepted” and “mission”). We interpret the events that precede the first event in the representation as we do because Strether sees himself (and Maria Gostrey sees him seeing himself) as Mrs. Newsome’s knight who will do her bidding and retrieve Chad.5 We (mis)read the events in Paris as Strether’s primary action to retrieve Chad and return him to his mother (function H), because that is the way Strether interprets his actions at the time they occur. Only when Strether reinterprets the function of his actions retrospectively, in the last chapter, from a primary action (function H) to a preliminary period of growth (functions D-E-F), do we also retrospectively shift our interpretation of the events that have already occurred.

Successive reinterpretations of one’s own behavior, and specifically the retrospective reinterpretation of what one has conceived as a primary endeavor (function H) as, instead, a merely subordinate experience (function F), resonant in psychic impressions but utterly ineffectual in altering the external world, are typical of the ironic reflections, in the literature of Modernism, of protagonists and poetic personas on their own ineffectiveness. For readers too, a Modernist indecisiveness in interpreting the function of events is not only portrayed in the protagonist’s self-reflections, in The Ambassadors and similar works, but played out, as we too shift our interpretations of the functions of events in response to the results of the protagonist’s own soul-searching. A representation that lingers at functions D, E, and F is an ideal structure to portray the character who continually grows, but never projects that growth into accomplishment.

It is the fabula, however, that is the primary source of the interpretative dilemma that the novel poses when it is contemplated in its entirety, after the reading process is completed. The novel’s refusal of conventional closure can be described, in my terms, as the effect of the suppression in fabula of the functions and the events to fill them that a complete sequence requires: the primary endeavor of function H, its success or failure (function I or I

\textit{in}eg) and an ensuing equilibrium (EQ). The suppression of the events to fill these functions is naturalized by the focalization, which withholds all information that Strether does not know—including, of course, everything that happens after the novel’s concluding scene.
But not only are the concluding events suppressed; the concluding functions are also suppressed. Had James written that most conventional of endings, that Strether lived happily ever after (or, for that matter, that Strether regretted that day’s decision for the rest of his life), the effect would have been to provide the interpretation without the event: an empty function that interprets an unspecified event or events. Specifically, a “happily ever after” ending, which is not unusual in novels and occurs frequently in fairy tales, indicates that a protagonist reaches some successful situation (function I), which is followed by an unbroken equilibrium (EQ). A function analysis draws attention to the radical suppression, at the conclusion of The Ambassadors, of both the functions to complete a sequence and the events to fill them. The primary interpretative dilemma the conclusion raises, I suggest, is that for the period after Strether’s final conversation with Maria Gostrey, neither events nor functions are reported: neither the events, which could ground speculation about their function (their consequences), nor the functions, against which one could gauge speculation about Strether’s subsequent actions. Without textual support on either plane—the event or the function that interprets it—any interpretation of Strether’s future behavior can be no more than one hypothesis among other equally possible hypotheses.

Although, from the perspective of a function analysis, Strether’s future behavior is closed to interpretation, his situation at the conclusion of the novel, on the other hand, is established in the final conversation between Strether and Maria Gostrey, in which sufficient information is given to permit readers to determine the position Strether has reached in the sequence of functions that constitutes a complete narrative sequence.6

My claim is that readers who reinterpret the events of the novel in light of their consequences will agree that sending Chad back to Woollett is Strether’s original goal, but that Strether does little to accomplish it (function H does not occur), and that as a result of his experiences Strether grows immeasurably (there is no doubt that function F occurs). In her brilliant analysis of ambiguity in James, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines narrative ambiguity as a structural pattern in which “we can discern two mutually exclusive fabulas in the same sju et [representation]” (The Concept of Ambiguity, 50). In the specific narratives by James dating from 1888 to 1901 in which she traces the phenomenon, the events of one representation reveal two different fabulas. For such a procedure to be possible, it is necessary for some of the events the two fabulas share to express
one function in one fabula and another function in the other fabula. In this novel James uses other procedures to undermine the narrative sequence; *The Ambassadors* is not an example of narrative ambiguity. For the reader who has completed the novel and perceives it in its entirety, the functions of the revealed events of the fabula are not ambiguous. During the process of reading, however, the cutting off of the representation at both ends, the incomplete sequence of the fabula, and the restricted focalization permit the reader to experience an almost dizzying sequence of interpretations and reinterpretations of events as functions.

Although Kafka’s “Before the Law” (“Vor dem Gesetz”) is very short, the story is complete; it was published during Kafka’s lifetime in the collection *Ein Landarzt*. The similarities in structural pattern and concomitant character type between this story and *The Ambassadors* illuminate epistemological issues that arise as a result of differences in the ontological status of the events that in the two fabulas precede and follow the events that the representations delineate. Like *The Ambassadors*, “Before the Law” depicts as its first event the arrival of the protagonist at the locus of the ensuing action. Like *The Ambassadors*, the story’s representation traces only a small portion of a complete narrative sequence.

The story’s first sentence describes a static scene that precedes the arrival of the protagonist: “Before the Law stands a doorkeeper” (148). Like James’s opening scene, Kafka’s first sentence suggests an opening equilibrium that is about to be disrupted.

(Kafka: fabula 1)

EQ a doorkeeper standing before the Law  
A some disruptive event that is about to occur

But the equilibrium is very short and does not extend beyond the arrival of the man from the country, which is reported in the second sentence. As soon as the man arrives, “prays for admittance to the Law” (148), and hears the doorkeeper refuse his request, we shift our interpretation. Just as we do as we read the opening pages of *The Ambassadors*, we construct a prior sequence according to which some previous disruptive event (function A) has motivated the man from the country (the C-actant) to decide (function C) to
attempt to alleviate the disruption, as a result of which he has set out (function C') to travel to the site of the Law, where he has now arrived. If we interpret the first event in the representation, the man’s arrival, as function G, we are indicating that we assume that the man is the C-actant and that he has reached the site of his primary endeavor. According to this reading we shift our interpretation of the first event, just as we do as we read the beginning of *The Ambassadors*, from a moment of equilibrium that is about to be broken (fabula 1) to the motivated arrival of function G (fabula 2). (Brackets indicate interpretations of events that precede chronologically the initial event in the representation.)

*(Kafka: fabula 2)*

| [EQ]   | equilibrium, in the country |
| [A]    | motivating disruptive event |
| [C]    | the man decides to attempt to alleviate the function-A situation by addressing the Law |
| [C']   | the man sets out on his journey to the site of the Law |
| G      | the man arrives at the site of the Law |

But as we read on, we shift our interpretation of the opening scene again, as we do when we decide that Maria Gostrey is testing Strether prior to empowering him for his future endeavor by offering her assistance. In “Before the Law,” when the doorkeeper describes a succession of increasingly powerful doorkeepers beyond the gate that he guards, we reconsider our interpretation of the initial event in the representation and reinterpret the present situation as the first stage of a number of preliminary testings. We see the doorkeeper’s behavior as function D, a test to which the protagonist must respond successfully (function E) in order to be empowered to pass through the gate (function F)—the set of events expressing functions D-E-F to be repeated successively when each doorkeeper is encountered, until the protagonist succeeds in reaching the Law (function G), the site of the primary action (function H). (Again, brackets indicate interpretations of events that precede chronologically the initial event in the representation.)

*(Kafka: fabula 3)*

| [EQ]   | equilibrium, in the country |
| [A]    | motivating disruptive event |
the man decides to attempt to alleviate the function-A situation

the man sets out on his journey to the site of the Law

successive doorkeepers test the man and empower him to pass through their gates

the man arrives at the site of the Law

the man’s primary action to alleviate the function-A situation

If the doorkeeper’s behavior is a test (function D), then the protagonist’s arrival marks a moment before the onset of function D. Our three successive interpretations of the opening scene of Kafka’s story and James’s novel are identical: (1) equilibrium, (2) function G, (3) a moment that precedes the events of function D. Moreover, in Kafka’s story as in James’s novel, a third-person voice speaks throughout, while the focalization—until the final sentence—is restricted to the perceptions and conceptions of the protagonist, whose interpretation of what he perceives guides readers’ interpretations of the function of events.

A text in which the voice is in the third-person cannot immediately indicate that focalization is restricted to a single character unless it blatantly announces that it will follow a specific character’s vision. When the focalization of a single character is narrated by a third-person voice, readers can know at most, as they begin to read, that what the voice tells includes at least one character’s perceptions and conceptions. Only as one continues to read is it possible to begin to establish that a narrative’s focalization is restricted to a single character’s perceptions and conceptions. Whereas James announces in the first sentence, which reports that Strether was not “disconcerted,” that aspects of Strether’s mind are to be revealed, “Vor dem Gesetz,” in this respect, is more subtle. Only when we return to the first sentence, after we have discovered that no scene is depicted that is not in the protagonist’s purview, do we realize that the representation opens when the man from the country approaches the gates to the Law; the opening scene depicts the protagonist’s initial perception of the doorkeeper who stands before the Law.

In Kafka’s story, a change in the quality of the language emphasizes and draws attention to the restricted focalization. A cluster of visually descriptive nouns and adjectives enters the language at the moment the man must make a crucial decision. When the door-
keeper, who has already prohibited entrance, suggests that the
man might test the prohibition, the visual imagery of the text
reveals that the man carefully inspects the doorkeeper, to acquire
all the information about his situation that he can, before he
decides how to respond.

As he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper in his fur
coop, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar
beard, he decides that it is better to wait until he gets per-
mission to enter. (148)

The narrative voice describes what the protagonist sees when he
looks closely at the doorkeeper to determine his chances of being
able to pass through the gate. Because readers are permitted to
perceive the doorkeeper as the man perceives him, we realize that
the man’s decision to wait indicates that the man has decided that
the doorkeeper is too large and powerful to challenge directly, and
that as a result the man has chosen an alternative method to reach
his goal.

Like Strether, Kafka’s protagonist interprets and reinterprets his
situation, and readers adjust their interpretations in response to
the man’s shifting interpretations, as they do to Strether’s. The
attention the man fixes on the one doorkeeper he can see draws
readers’ attention away from the other doorkeepers whom the
doorkeeper describes. The man’s behavior suggests that he per-
ceives this doorkeeper as his only impediment to the Law: he waits
for years; he uses up all of his belongings to give the doorkeeper
bribes. Finally, “[h]e forgets the other doorkeepers, and this first
one seems to him the sole obstacle preventing access to the Law”
(149). Readers shift their interpretation in accordance with the
interpretation the man has reached.

(Kafka: fabula 4)

| EQ | equilibrium, in the country |
| A  | motivating disruptive event |
| C  | the man decides to attempt to alleviate the function-A situation |
| C' | the man sets out on his journey to the site of the Law |
| D  | the doorkeeper tests the man |
| E  | the man responds by waiting |
| F  | the doorkeeper empowers the man to pass |
G the man arrives at the site of the Law
H the man’s primary action to alleviate the function-A situation

But the man’s interpretation changes again, and once more readers change their interpretation in response. After focusing his attention for so long on his contest with the doorkeeper, the man finally looks for assistance wherever it might be found:

[S]ince in his yearlong contemplation of the doorkeeper he has come to know even the fleas in his fur collar, he begs the fleas as well to help him and to change the doorkeeper’s mind. (149)

For the man to turn to the fleas as a source of potential empowerment, I suggest, is an indication of a shift in the man’s interpretation of his contest with the doorkeeper. Whereas the doorkeeper’s prohibition has seemed to him a preliminary test (function D) to which he must successfully respond in order to be permitted to undertake his primary endeavor (function H), now the contest with the doorkeeper has acquired such importance in his eyes that he perceives it as his primary concern (function H). It is this reinterpretation that makes possible the man’s turning to some source of empowerment other than the doorkeeper—even the fleas—to aid him in his contest with the doorkeeper. In his new interpretation, begging the fleas for assistance in changing the doorkeeper’s mind is comparable in its function to, in his previous interpretation, waiting for the doorkeeper to permit entrance to the Law; both actions express function E. Readers shift their interpretation (at least momentarily) in accordance with the man’s new interpretation.

(Kafka: fabula 5)

[EQ] equilibrium, in the country
[A] motivating disruptive event
[C] the man decides to attempt to alleviate the function-A situation
[C’] the man sets out on his journey to the site of the Law
[E] the man begs the fleas for assistance
[F] the fleas intercede with the doorkeeper
[H] the contest with the doorkeeper is the primary action
In the final sentence of the story, however, a shift in the focalization from the man to the doorkeeper creates a complication for readers who have adopted the protagonist’s interpretation of the function of events as the model for their own interpretation. Indicated by the word recognizes (“erkennt”), the shift in focalization occurs at the moment when the doorkeeper perceives that the man is near death. The man has just asked the doorkeeper why no one else has requested admission during all the years he has spent waiting. The concluding sentence reads:

The doorkeeper recognizes that the man has reached his end, and to let his failing senses catch the words roars in his ear: “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.”

(149–50)

The doorkeeper’s speech with which the text concludes is, as I read the story, the last thing the man perceives. Because the shift in focalization occurs before the man hears the doorkeeper’s words, the man’s interpretation of the doorkeeper’s speech is not revealed. Thus the man’s interpretation is unavailable to guide and support readers’ reinterpretations of earlier events in light of the final scene.

Without the assistance of the protagonist, then, we accept the doorkeeper’s affirmation that the locus of the story is the man’s personal gate to the Law, rather than the Law itself, and we interpret the man’s long waiting as function E, as the man himself interpreted it for many years after he made the crucial decision to wait (see “Kafka: fabula 4”). Now that we know the consequences of that decision, however, we can interpret it more definitively than we (or he) could at the time he made it. We may even surmise that the man’s last question is an indication of his own awareness of those consequences, and that he hoped, as he reflected on his life, to mitigate his own failure by perceiving it in comparison to the failure of others. In any case, I propose, after reading the entire story we interpret the events of the fabula as a sequence that ends in what I call negative functions: functions that represent specified events that do not occur.

(Kafka: the complete fabula)

[EQ] equilibrium, in the country
[A] motivating disruptive event
[C] the man decides to attempt to alleviate the function-A situation
[C'] the man sets out on his journey to the site of the Law
D the doorkeeper tests the man
E the man waits
F\text{neg} the man receives no empowerment
G\text{neg} the man does not reach the site of the Law
H\text{neg} the man does not address the Law
I\text{neg} the man does not alleviate the function-A situation

But although the information from the doorkeeper—for which there is no equivalent in James’s novel—permits us to conceive a completed fabula, the duration of the representation is restricted to the duration of the man’s perceptions: from his first view of the gate, to the moment when his perceptions fail as he dies, which is the very moment that empowerment, were he to receive it, would become useless. Throughout the representation, the doorkeeper tests the man (function D), and the man’s response (function E) fails to win for him the power to approach the Law, and to permit the story to move to function F. The representation lingers along a segment of the narrative path that is even shorter than James’s representation, which traces functions D-E-F. Kafka’s representation is reduced to function D and function E.

*(Kafka: representation)*

D the doorkeeper tests the man
E the man waits

The differences between James’s novel and Kafka’s story obviously extend far beyond the single additional function in *The Ambassadors* that indicates that Strether—but not the man from the country—develops his abilities as a result of the activities in which he engages. What I would like to call the *texture* of the two narratives is very different. The pages of James’s novel are filled with the details that color the primary events that do and do not take place. In large part this is the material that Roland Barthes describes in an early article as *integrational units or indices*: indexical information that refers “not to a . . . consequential act but to a more or less diffuse concept which is nevertheless necessary to
the meaning of the story: psychological indices concerning the characters, data regarding their identity, notations of ‘atmosphere’ (“Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” 92).10

Kafka’s story, as we saw, provides details of this sort only in the one sentence that tells that the man inspects the doorkeepers’ appearance while deciding whether to test the latter’s prohibition against entry. The absence otherwise of such details in this story, and for the most part throughout the corpus of Kafka’s work, is one of the reasons that Kafka’s stories and novels can be interpreted in as many different ways—religious, political, psychological, etc.—as we have seen them interpreted. The other reason is demonstrated by the function analysis of “Before the Law.” The representation includes only the events that we interpret as a testing to permit entrance and the character’s response: waiting. For events that precede chronologically the represented period of testing, we are given enough information to interpret the function but no specification at all about what the events are that express those functions. Literally for this segment of the story, and often throughout Kafka’s corpus, his narratives are open to multiple readings because the events are unspecified and readers are given only the interpretation—the function. For the events that are chronologically subsequent to the man’s function-E waiting, the only information provided is that they do not occur. Moreover, the represented event—a testing to permit entrance—is as generic an event as one can imagine. In fact, Jurij Lotman has proposed, in an article “The Origin of Plot,” “[L]ooked at typologically, the initial situation is that a certain plot-space is divided by a single boundary into an internal and an external sphere, and a single character has the opportunity to cross that boundary” (167).11

As many disparate interpretations as have been proposed of the events that express the functions in Kafka’s narratives, and as differently as Kafka’s story and James’s novels express the very few functions in the representations of both narratives analyzed in this chapter, a function analysis nonetheless reveals a similar pattern of causality in the two narratives. Both linger at functions D and E and, in James’s novel, function F; the representations of both narratives trace only a small segment of a narrative sequence.

In a complete narrative sequence, a C-actant undertakes action that begins (function C’), continues (function H), and concludes (function I or function I_{neg}). For all the emphasis I have placed (and have argued that readers place) on a C-actant’s decision to act (function C) and on the moment where thought leads to action
function C'), function H is a C-actant’s primary action. Functions D-E-F, on the other hand, are expendable. In some traditional narratives, as we have seen, functions D-E-F are omitted. In other traditional narratives, in instances in which C-actants initially lack the strength or knowledge they need to accomplish function H, functions D-E-F trace the process of empowerment that prepares them for and precedes function H. Function H is primary; functions D-E-F are merely preparatory. In the schema of traditional narrative, functions D-E-F, without a further function H, are meaningless. The protagonists of The Ambassadors and “Before the Law” both fail to reach, much less to accomplish, function H. Both substitute preparatory behavior for primary action, permitting the primary goal to disintegrate while devoting their energies to the expendable.

Function analysis provides tools to analyze ways that narrative representations guide readers’ (listeners’, viewers’) interpretations of the causal relations among reported events. Changes in the ways that representations guide interpretation of causal relations can be discerned over time, and in response to prevailing social and political as well as aesthetic priorities. A recurring pattern at a given historical period, as we saw in chapter 3, can sometimes guide understanding of the expectations and values of a time and place. Although no two narratives can fully represent a historical period, the protagonists of The Ambassadors and “Before the Law” do illustrate the behavior and perceptions of behavior of a typically Modernist character type that seems to arise in Anglo-American and Continental literature toward the end of the nineteenth century. Strether at least accomplishes function F. The stage of Modernism he typifies offers a discouraging view of the possibility of altering the outcome of events in the world, but retains as a lure the possibility of psychological and intellectual development. The man from the country, on the other hand, typifies a later stage of Modernism that offers an even more negative view of mankind’s potential. Spending his years in waiting, at function E, he fails to reach function F. Even the consolation of personal growth is denied him.

Moreover, the experience of misinterpreting and reinterpreting the function of events to which readers of both narratives are subjected dramatizes an epistemological doubt that Brian McHale, in Postmodernist Fiction, perceives is a characteristic of Modernist narrative. A function analysis of The Ambassadors and “Before the Law” illustrates several ways that representations of
Modernist narratives can create epistemological doubt. The representations of both narratives include the events of no more than two or three preparatory functions. But the procedure by which the two representations are cut off, at the beginning and at the end, are different in each of the four cases. For the segment of fabula that precedes the representation, the procedure we find in *The Ambassadors* is not unusual. James postpones the events that are chronologically prior to the initial event of his representation, but gradually reveals both the events and their consequences, which permits readers to assign functions to the events and to establish the segment of fabula that precedes Strether’s arrival. For this segment, both the events and their functions are given.\(^{13}\)

In Kafka’s story, for the segment that precedes the representation, the events are never revealed, but their consequences are. Because a function is an interpretation of an event in light of its consequences, readers can determine the functions of events that are unspecified. By determining the functions, one can establish the segment of fabula that precedes the arrival of the man from the country as a set of empty functions—functions that are empty because the events to fill them are not expressed. Empty functions represent events that take place in the represented world, but that except for their consequences are suppressed in the representation.\(^{14}\) For this segment, the events are suppressed, but their functions are given.\(^{15}\)

Because James does not conclude *The Ambassadors* with the conventional “they lived happily ever after,” or with any other indication of the effects of otherwise unrevealed events that would establish empty functions, the fabula of James’s novel does not extend beyond the events that conclude the representation. After the conversation at the novel’s end between Strether and Maria Gostrey, there are no further events in the represented world, just as there are no further events in the representation. James’s fabula has no concluding segment; neither events nor functions are given.

In Kafka’s story the sequence is completed. Equilibrium is reinstated, but only as a result of the man’s death, which brings his efforts to a conclusion, rather than by an action that effectively alters the events of function A. Because of the shift in focalization in the final sentence, although the representation concludes at the moment of the man’s last perception, the new focalizer who watches the man die can conduct the countdown to the moment of death, which the reader is permitted to know occurs. The pri-
mary structural difference in the conclusions of the two narratives is the shift in focalization in Kafka’s story, but the consequences of that shift for the final segment of the story’s fabula are profound. Because the man’s death is revealed, readers are permitted to construct a set of negative functions, which represent actions that are not accomplished: specific events that do not occur, but for which the locus of their nonoccurrence—unlike the realm of the individual reader’s imagination to which Strether’s further actions are consigned—is the represented world of the story. The concluding segment of Kafka’s fabula contains both events and functions: negative functions and specified events that do not occur. Negative functions interpret consequences that are unachieved; the events that express these functions are a motivated not-doing of an action that, were it to occur, would contradict the negative quality of the function that interprets it. Were the man to enter the gate, for example, we would interpret the event as function \( F \), rather than function \( F_{\text{neg}} \).

Except for the opening segment of the fabula of *The Ambassadors*, the three other procedures by which the representations of these narratives are cut off at each end are innovative in the extreme. James’s incomplete fabula, with its effective suppression of concluding functions as well as events, represents in its structure the problematics of epistemology that are recurrent in Modernist literature. The empty functions in the opening positions in Kafka’s fabula—a common procedure for closing a fabula but not, as Kafka uses it, for representing the primary causal disruptive event—draw attention to epistemological issues as well, while the negative functions with which his fabula concludes are representative of a motivated cessation of action that is a specifically late-Modern phenomenon. For the protagonists of both narratives, as a function analysis shows, epistemological doubt is dramatized in the interpretations and reinterpretations of their own behavior that both find necessary. Readers too share the protagonists’ interpretive shifts, in part because the focalization reveals the protagonists’ epistemological quandaries, but also because the two representations linger at the preparatory functions, which undermines the book covers as a guide to interpreting the function of the reported events.