
Treed Domains Map Renaissance Worlds: Thomas Pavel's
The Poetics of Plot

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Thomas Pavel brings to his study of formal narrative analysis an unusually broad experience as a linguist (trained in the philosophy of language) who writes both fictional as well as critical works. His creative fusion of literary studies and linguistics offers a fresh approach to problematic areas such as the place of plot in literary criticism. Although Mieke Bal (1977) and Gérard Genette (1983) have tended to limit narratology to the study of textual narratives, Pavel argues that there is equal room for a poetics of plot in the study of other diegetic techniques such as drama and film.

What *The Poetics of Plot* undertakes goes beyond previous formal analysis of simple folk tales or short stories, with the dual intent to clarify both the socio-historical implications and practical functions of plot in the relatively sophisticated dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. Pavel's own interest in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century drama, together with a desire to examine plays which are chronologically and authorially linked, informs his choice of Marlowe's tragedies as diverse examples of plot construction by a single author. He also analyzes two semantically and syntactically contrasting revenge tragedies — *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Arden of Feversham* — and a particularly complex Shakespearean tragedy, *King Lear*.

There are difficulties, which Pavel acknowledges, inherent in proposing a grammar in the field of narratology since, unlike linguistic grammars, this area lacks the centuries of grammatical research which provide a sound basis for "higher-level formalization," and he points out that "there is little in narratology to resemble the concerted effort of hundreds of linguists over three decades of intensive work" (16). In light of the grammar's recognized newness as a narratological tool, Pavel speaks with admiration of Noel Chomsky's elaborated formal findings, and stresses that his plot-grammar explores elementary stages in the construction of a formalism. Although he affirms that the grammar he proposes "owes much to its predecessors" (Barthes, Greimas, Todorov, Bremond, Prince, Van Dijk, Doležel, and Ryan), Pavel asserts that his system is designed as an improvement on its competitors in three significant areas: "namely the explicitness of plot-advance, the role of characters and groups of characters, and the links between plot and its meaning" (13). Unlike others (Greimas, Todorov),

Pavel offers an "explicit formulation of the step by step unfolding of the plot" (14).

Pavel's solution to the problem of connecting actions with characters or groups of characters is to use aspects of game-theory in suggesting that plots are "strategic clashes" (14) which require more than sequences of anonymous action for proper understanding. To this end, he asserts the necessity of knowing the character or group who performs an action, the reason for it, and its overall effect on the whole "strategic configuration" (14). In game-theory, the maker of each move chooses rationally from all available options on the basis of available evidence, and Pavel is obviously pushing this idea up to (or beyond) its limit when analyzing the choices of a character like King Lear, whose choices are clearly not only limited but also irrational. The basic assumption, common to Pavel's predecessors, is that plot structure is comparable to the syntactic structure of sentences; possible plots, says Pavel, can be imagined as a language obeying tacit or explicit rules. This linguistic analogy (dear to the Structuralist heart) Pavel has left vague, probably because — like all honest Structuralists — he cannot solve the problem of whether the plot of every text is actually a language, a syntax, or a dialect.

The central operational concept of the grammar is the notion of *Move* which works, as in game-theory, to indicate a progressive logic in the story. A *Move* takes the approximate place of a sentence in the syntax of natural languages, and two main components make up *Moves*: the abstract categories Problem and Solution, which cover a multitude of concrete situations in which a Problem calls for a *Move* as an attempt towards a Solution. The narrative trees, Pavel proposes, are based on the syntactic constituent trees used by linguists, in which the symbols on the left of a branch directly dominate the symbols on the right. Within each Problem, contributing trees (*Moves*) can be embedded to indicate their causative connection within the whole development, representing "a chain of narrative causality" (19). The set of moves belonging to the character who initiates each move is labelled the *domain* of that character. In order to provide for sufficiently "elegant representations of narrative structures" (21) several phenomena have to be represented through "transformations" which relate two classes of trees. Because, as Pavel points out, many narratives and dramas start in *medias res*, transformations may account for the differences between the abstract order of events in the plot (which in his model is based on strategy) and the textual succession of presented events.

While other narratologists have attempted to relate the operators which modify predicates naming actions in a story to the ones employed in modal logic and its extensions, Pavel's proposed model differs in that his proposal allows the plot to be split into more than one narrative domain. The notion of worlds within worlds offered by possible world theory — which Pavel maps

in his later *Fictional Worlds* (1986), exploring "complex" and "dual structures" (56) — is analogous or closely related to this concept. In *Fictional Worlds*, Pavel describes the two levels upon which the play world (like that of a children's game) takes place and the correspondences between these levels of reality and fictionality. Pavel cites a game in which three children play with globs of mud and small black pebbles as an example of the "dual structure" which is a "complex structure" made of two parts and standing in opposition to simple universes. The children's world of make-believe, in which they (as cooks) offer each other tasty pies and raisins, forms a small universe which is linked to the first universe of children, mud, and pebbles by the relation of correspondence "will be taken as" (56-57). From such "dual structures," where the secondary world (or universe) corresponds to one in the real world, it is but a short leap to the dual structures wherein there is no isomorphism — these Pavel calls "salient structures" (57-62). Since works of fiction combine heterogeneous sets of worlds and incompatible world structures (playing, says Pavel, with the impossible), salient structures are the basis of fiction. After the medieval passion play, with its "nonproblematic salient structures" (63), where large universes are confidently divided into a sacred and a profane level, late Renaissance and Baroque literature displays a more labyrinthine ontological complexity; Renaissance dramas such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* offer a ludic manipulation of ontological structures, signalled by the recurring play-within-a-play device. Although children's mud pie games, salient structures and fictional worlds seem distant from the plot patterns set out in the earlier work, they are evidently linked by the idea of narrative domains. Pavel's graceful charting of the relationship between worlds and texts in his later *Fictional Worlds* shows both the limits and usefulness of the plot-grammar, as he moves beyond the constraints of a purely formal plot analysis offered in *The Poetics of Plot*.

The signs of later, broader developments are nonetheless present in *The Poetics of Plot*. After G.H. von Wright (1963) and Lubomir Doležel (who specifies both distinction and association between modal and anthropological concepts in "Narrative Semantics," 1976), Pavel asserts his use of "anthropological" notions, as they correspond to purely logical modal concepts (such as actuality, possibility, necessity). Pavel sets out, then, in his plot analyses to avoid sophisticated interpretations of the texts examined and to limit semantic considerations to those elements that make comprehension of the plot possible. Although plot semantics can only account for part of the play's overall meaning, Pavel's analyses show how critical interpretations could be challenged if they neglect important elements of the *Move*-structure and semantic domains.

If a plot-grammar is a model, the value of which can be gauged by checking its structural descriptions against the reader's literary intuitions, then Pavel's *Move-grammar* in *The Poetics of Plot* offers, through its narrative trees, just such a link between plot organisation and intuitive literary correspondences within the text. What the strategy proposed in *The Poetics of Plot* can thus enhance better than traditional criticism (or even other narrative theories) is the consideration of narrative as a system of non-linear, hierarchical dependencies, something like the syntactic hierarchies of sentences. Although syntactical dependencies fit the normal linguistic category for "paradigm," Pavel shifts the stress away from the idea of narrative's linearity to look at it afresh as non-linear.

Pavel's method in *The Poetics of Plot* also provides a useful approach to cultural and stylistic problems, in particular the vexed question of period styles. Heinrich Wölfflin's original work on the term "baroque," with the publication of his *Renaissance und Barock* in 1888 and *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* in 1915, prompted literary historians (like Oskar Walzel), struggling with the problem of period style, to apply Wölfflin's fundamental concepts — such as "closed" and "open" form — to distinguish between Classic and Baroque as the two main types of literary style. When, in 1917, Walzel claimed Shakespeare belonged to the "nontectonic" Baroque style in contrast to the "tectonic" form of French classical tragedy, the debate continued with some perplexing contradictions. Indicating that Wölfflin's criteria (and particularly their subsequent application to the notion of what constitutes the *baroque*) (1888, 1943) are insufficiently precise, Pavel takes up the issue and argues the need for "a richer, more detailed set of structural parameters" (118).

His conclusion suggests that the idea of clarifying previous "all-embracing and fuzzy categories" (116) through the criteria presented by a *Move-grammar* is enticing, because it is less cumbersome. Pavel's scheme allows for previous attempts to distinguish between what Walzel calls the *tectonicity* of the classic style and the *non-tectonicity* of the baroque style to be articulated as the "narrative complexity of a *Move-structure*" (118). A glance at Pavel's final classification table (7.1) in *The Poetics of Plot* shows precisely how the simplest plot structure of a play such as *Tamburlaine I* is more "tectonic," or closed, since it fills only one of the less important categories in the table: Bajazeth's agony is listed under the heading "Lateral developments" which is part of the main division "Pseudo-plots" (as opposed to "Secondary plots"). A far more complex play like *King Lear* occupies a place at the opposite end of the table, with listings in five columns: these include Edmund's subterfuge under the division "Secondary Plots," and in addition to the parallel "Tribulations" of Lear and Edgar, Cornwall's killing, Kent's story and the comic action (or stories) of the Fool fall under various

headings in the "Pseudo-plots" division. Such a stylistic taxonomy might initially show the apparent "non-tectonicity" or plasticity of a complex play like *King Lear*, with its many structural features filling more slots in the table than *Tamburlaine I*. Although this classification may confirm that *King Lear*'s multiplicity thus conforms to the idea of Baroque *Zeitgeist*, as Pavel says, it allows for more critical scope and actually demonstrates the balanced flexibility of approach made possible by the *Move-grammar*.

As Pavel points out, critics from William Empson to Richard Levin have examined the number of plots as an indication of period and style. The tragedies of the English Renaissance are stylistically characterised by multiple plots, which Pavel defines as structures of moves marked by "a stable number of actors and the exhaustion of a problem load by means of successful or unsuccessful solutions" (118). By definition, more than one plot is possible in a text where the number and complexity of plots indicates particular "plot-styles" which can be attributed to author, genre or period. This analysis shows that Marlowe's plots change radically from tragedy to tragedy, that Shakespeare's tragic plots are ramified combinations of different devices, and that revenge tragedies generally prefer solution-oriented plots. Pavel then shows how plot analysis can indicate stylistic preoccupations. He makes a connection between the "narratively chaotic universe" (126), seen in Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, where the usually comedic, random, non-purposive, "Auxiliary-oriented" plot is used, and twentieth-century sensibility, expressed by T.S. Eliot's admiration for the play. This kind of literary cross-referencing is obviously made more cogent by the precise, yet versatile, model proposed here by Pavel.

One of the problems of a study of this sort occurs when the anthropological notions seem to run counter to the necessary modal concepts. The schematizing of such notions, although clearly diverse in the splitting of domains, prevents any flourishing of anthropological detail, and automatically limits the plot picture to a sometimes puzzling configuration: the tree which wants to spread ever outward but can only push relentlessly, in each progressive *Move*, onward and upward. It is more difficult to follow the development of the trees vertically (rather than horizontally) as given in Pavel's text, although clearly the intuitive connection between upward growth and progression is maintained by such a choice. For Thomas Pavel's intriguing scheme in *The Poetics of Plot*, the eye must travel up, down and across in a kaleidoscopic range of movement, whereas it seems that the pattern of the *Move-grammar* would be more easily accessible (but not more ludic) if the tree were simply tipped on its side — perhaps then metaphorically less a tree than a series of pathways.

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Negotiating Greenblatt's Shakespeare: New Historicism and Shakespearean Negotiations

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No one will contest the contribution of Stephen Greenblatt to Renaissance studies. His 1980 book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, compelled a rethinking of the rhetorical strategies which underpinned the construction of the "individual" in Elizabethan and Jacobean texts. More recently his own essays, together with the collective work of scholars grouped around the Berkeley journal, *Representations*, have constituted a focal point of new historicist criticism. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* is a book in which the reader will recognize both Greenblatt's earlier concerns and his present preoccupations. It returns to engage the writings of Shakespeare, the figure who unquestionably stood at the centre of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, and it extends the project of new historicism in both the theoretical opening chapter and the subsequent analyses. There can be no doubt that *Shakespearean Negotiations* deserves a wide readership. Greenblatt's readings of Shakespeare's texts will provoke specialists to rethink and re-examine passages or plays which may have become all-too-familiar. But it would be unfortunate if the book were restricted to Renaissance scholars. For especially in a period when literary criticism may have been over-preoccupied with the inner-textual play of tropes and figures, Greenblatt's analyses provide a salutary reminder that a text cannot escape the contingency of history. Critics who are interested in literary theory, in questions about history and its inscription in literary texts will find *Shakespearean Negotiations* a challenging and thought-provoking book.

It is indeed appropriate that Greenblatt prefaces his textual investigations with reflection on his methodological orientation. He sets out to explore what he calls "a poetics of culture," that is, to examine the networks of discourses through which the cultural practices of a society are shaped, and in which aesthetic form acquires social power. As he put it, "I want to know how cultural objects, expressions, and practices — here, principally, plays by Shakespeare and the stage on which they first appeared — acquired compelling force" (5). It is clear that within such terms of inquiry the insights of formalism textual readings, however illuminating, will inevitably fall short of comprehending the text as a cultural practice. For the formalist