All Along…! The Pre-History of the Plot Twist in Nineteenth-Century Fiction

Milan Terlunen

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Abstract

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The plot twist is a complex narrative surprise in which a revelation retroactively transforms readers’ understanding of the preceding events. Readers discover belatedly that the situation depicted in the narrative had all along been quite different from what they thought. Although the term “plot twist” was first used in the early twentieth century, many of the best-known works of fiction of the nineteenth century were revealed, in retrospect, to be twist narratives. This dissertation studies twist narratives and their readers in the period before the plot twist became a known device.

Through case studies of Jane Austen’s Emma, Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations, Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” and Agatha Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, the chapters investigate what kinds of knowledge-making practices readers engage in during first-time readings and rereadings of twist narratives, as well as before and after reading. Across these chapters I make the case that twist narratives demonstrate the crucial and interconnected roles of knowledge and temporality in any narrative experience. What we know, and when, and especially what we don’t (yet) know, is crucial to how narratives work and why we enjoy them.
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Introduction: What Readers Know When

A young woman believes a flirtatious man intends to propose to her, only to discover that all along he has been engaged to another woman in the village. A young man rises in society thanks to an anonymous benefactor, whom he believes to be his eccentric old neighbor; later, he discovers that all along his benefactor was an escaped convict to whom he’d shown kindness as a child. A working-class woman goes into massive debt to replace a rich friend’s necklace she loses, only to learn that all along the original necklace was a fake. A country doctor recounts an investigation into a murder, only to reveal that he himself was the murderer all along. These are the plots of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace” and Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Despite differences in their plots, the underlying construction is the same: a belated revelation that all along the situation has been very different from what we’d understood. By “we” here I mean readers as well as characters: readers discover belatedly that what we’ve been reading has been an elaborate setup for this revelation. Since the early twentieth century, this construction has gone by the name of plot twist. Stereotyped as a cheap trick and little studied to date, attention to the plot twist can in fact enrich existing scholarship on reading and narrative by centering questions of knowledge and temporality. What we know, and when, and especially what we don’t (yet) know, is crucial to how narratives work and why we enjoy them.

The Plot Twist: Description and Definition

The plot twist as I define it is a technique which misdirects how readers understand the nature or significance of a narrative’s events, before eventually revealing this misdirection and presenting us with a new way of understanding that dramatically transforms our knowledge of what came before. It is a complex kind of narrative surprise, distinguished by its retroactive
transformation of readers’ understanding. In technical terms, a twist narrative is what German media theorist Britta Hartmann calls a “rückwirkende Überraschungsgeschichte” (backwards-acting surprise narrative).\(^1\) While readers may experience the revelation of a twist as a sudden, intense shock, most will also retrospectively notice hints hiding in plain sight. Readers were given all the plot-relevant information, but arrive at knowledge only belatedly.

A useful heuristic for whether a particular plot counts as a twist is whether the pivotal revelation can be summed up in a sentence beginning “All along, …” All along, A was in love with B not C. All along, E and F were the same person. All along, the narrator was the murderer. All along, he was a ghost. What the phrase “all along” helps to capture is the sense that a plot twist comprehensively transforms our understanding of what has gone before.\(^2\)

Plot twists by this definition are to be distinguished from two closely related kinds of narrative surprise. First, the *peripeteia* of Ancient Greek tragedy, as discussed by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. While the reversal of fortunes associated with the downfall of a tragic protagonist like Oedipus is a surprise to the character, it is not a surprise to audiences, who are typically in a position of dramatic irony, able to know more than the character can. In the case of *Oedipus Rex*, for example, this dramatic irony comes both from the story being a myth already familiar to


\(^2\) While twists are perhaps most common at or near the end of a narrative, they can occur much earlier. The twist of *Great Expectations* occurs around the novel’s mid-point, while the first twist of *Psycho* occurs less than half an hour into the movie. They nevertheless count as plot twists in my terms, since the new development substantially transforms our understanding of the preceding events.
Athenian audiences and also from the opening scene, in which Tiresias tells Oedipus “The murderer you’re looking for is you,” but is dismissed by Oedipus as mad.3

Second, the *deus ex machina* is a surprise for readers, but without the retroactive transformation of plot understanding. Like a twist, a *deus ex machina* can provide unforeseen resolution to a plot, but in hindsight the resolution was not prepared for. For this reason, it is among the “cheap plot tricks” taxonomized by Marie-Laure Ryan, “cheap” in the sense that it is a lazy attempt to resolve a story “when the author has painted the characters into a corner.” Ryan in fact classifies such tricks as “aesthetically deficient plot twists,” and I take the key distinction to lie in whether the surprise has been prepared for: a *deus ex machina* truly comes out of nowhere; a plot twist reveals a situation that was the case all along.4

In proximity to these two kinds of narrative surprise, but lacking the *peripeteia’s* frisson of dramatic irony (at least first time around) and tainted by association with the *deus ex machina*, it’s unsurprising that, despite popular success and widespread cultural awareness, the plot twist has not enjoyed much literary or scholarly prestige.

It should by now be clear that the plot twist is a complex, relatively specific plot construction. It is therefore quite distinct, beyond a verbal echo, from the phrase “twists and turns,” which describes the surprising, unpredictable course of events that many plots involve.


4 Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design,’ *Narrative*, 17.1 (2009), 56–75 (pp. 63, 56).
Many narratives are “twisty” in this broader sense without being twist narratives in my narrower sense.

Throughout this dissertation, I endeavor to use consistent terminology when discussing twists. First, while in everyday language the term “(plot) twist” is often used to isolate the moment of revelation (“there’s a huge twist at the end”), I use the term to refer to both the setup and the revelation phases together (since if there’s no setup it’s not a plot twist). “Setup” and “revelation” are therefore also key terms in this study. As I use them, these terms refer to sections of text. The revelation is a (usually short) stretch of text in which the new way of understanding the narrative is explicitly offered to readers. The setup is all the text that precedes it, which will include some preparation for the revelation, but much more besides: a setup that concerned itself exclusively with preparing readers for the twist wouldn’t be effective.\(^5\) Finally, I use the phrase “twist narrative” to refer to the overall work, which in the case of this dissertation is typically a literary work but could in principle be a play or movie or video game.

One final linguistic note: while twist narratives can be readily found in French and German literature, as I outline later in this introduction, the language to describe them is less established than in the English-speaking world. In French, “retournement de situation” (overturning of the situation) seems to be the preferred term, although it sometimes also designates peripeteia and deus ex machina. In German, while the aforementioned rückwirkende

\(^5\) Some twist narratives also have a substantial aftermath, i.e. a phase after the revelation. Great Expectations continues to tell a longer story after Magwitch is revealed as Pip’s benefactor. I don’t focus on the aftermath phase in this dissertation since it’s an optional rather than a necessary element, and is less concerned with manipulating or transforming readers’ knowledge than the earlier phases of a twist narrative.
Überraschungsgeschichte is a precise scholarly term, in everyday language and even some scholarship, the English term “Twist” is used.

* * *

This study of the plot twist draws on and in turn contributes to several major aspects of literary scholarship: reader response, genre and evaluation. Each takes on a somewhat different appearance in relation to the plot twist.

Twists need readers. If a plot twists on the page and nobody’s there to read it, did it really happen? In short, my answer is no. In particular, the plot twist makes it crucial to distinguish between readers with different degrees of knowledge. Given the transformation in understanding that a plot twist effects, a first-time reader’s experience is dramatically different before they experience the twist compared to after it. For rereaders, on the other hand, a twist narrative becomes imbued with dramatic irony, closely resembling the experience of peripeteia in that we’re able to foresee a surprise of which characters are unaware. Foreknowledge of events is not the only kind of new knowledge available to rereaders, however. Rereaders are also in a position to understand an author’s craft, appreciating how the twist was prepared for without being noticeable to first-time readers. Yet there are also limitations on rereaders’ knowledge: while they may well remember or mentally reconstruct their first reading, they can never again know from the inside what that first reading experience was like.⁶ As Wolfgang Iser has theorized, an important activity readers engage in is mentally filling in “gaps” in the text where meaning is left

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⁶ For convenience, I use the term “first-time readers” as a shorthand for unspoiled first-time readers, since it’s entirely possible for readers to already know the plot of a twist narrative. I also presume a first-time reader unaware that there even is a twist.
under-specified. With twist narratives, first-time readers are prompted to fill gaps without even being aware that they’re doing so, or that there might be alternative ways to make sense of the words in front of them; rereaders, in contrast, are able to perceive how they were led astray in their earlier gap-filling, and can now fill the same textual gaps with a new, knowing confidence.

My dissertation title announces that this is a study of the plot twist. To be more precise, it is a study of twists in relation to their readers. More abstractly, the dissertation studies knowledge-making practices across the nineteenth century which allowed readers to make sense of individual twist narratives as well as eventually make the plot twist itself into a known entity. On the other hand, this dissertation does not substantially address authors. Insofar as authors enter into this study, it is as figures whom readers conjecture and to whom they attribute intentions inferred from the literary work. An author-centric study of twist narratives would be valuable in its own right, and might turn to manuscripts and proof revisions as well as diaries and letters to investigate how writers constructed twists and what they thought about the process. Yet such a study would not be separable from questions of reading, since it would need to consider the role of readers in the same way I consider writers: that is each writer’s conjecture of how readers will respond to the work in question. Twist narratives are of course created by people, in some cases representing exceptional narrative ingenuity and writerly labor, but in this study I choose to center the less self-evident contributions of readers.

The Rezeptionsästhetik associated with Jauss and Iser gave rise to two quite distinctive methodologies which have been called reader response: a phenomenological approach on the one

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hand, and a historical-sociological approach on the other. I deploy each of these approaches in different chapters of the dissertation. The first two chapters offer phenomenological accounts of first-time reading and rereading respectively, positing how a generic reader might understand specific moments in the texts based on what they do or don’t already know. The latter two chapters examine newspapers and other print media in order to reconstruct the social life of twist narratives within specific historically-situated communities.

Genre is something of a red herring for the study of twist narratives, at least in a narrow sense of genre categories under which artworks can be classified. Twist narratives don’t constitute a genre, but appear scattered across many genres. While there are robust historical associations with the plot twist and specific genres like detective fiction or horror movies, it has never been an exclusive or essential feature of any single genre. Since genres establish specific plot conventions and thus allow readers to anticipate where the story is going, the plot twist could not have retained its power to surprise if it was too closely allied with a specific genre. While a history could certainly be told of the shifting associations between the plot twist and various genres, I have selected the central works of my dissertation to demonstrate the diversity of genres across which the twist appears.

That said, genre is important to this dissertation in an expanded sense of generalized literary knowledge. By this I mean the prior knowledge of literary conventions and possibilities


9 While the detective genre may have conventionalized the “surprise ending,” this is not equivalent to a plot twist. There is a difference between a whodunit where an unlikely suspect turns out to be the one who did it, and a whodunit where the crime was committed by the narrator, or the detective’s sidekick, or the victim, or everybody, or nobody.
that readers bring to a particular work. Whether derived from reading one work, or many, or second-hand (an essay on “the gothic”; a teacher explaining sonnet structure) this generic knowledge constitutes a background against which we experience a literary work. Genre in this expanded sense is similar to Hans Robert Jauss’s “horizon of expectations,” in that it is a historically contingent body of knowledge, which shapes and can in turn be modified by the reading of an individual work. However, whereas Jauss’s conception of literary history centers on a tension between convention and innovation, with each great literary work subverting the horizon of expectations of its moment, twist narratives play with foreknowledge and expectations in more complex ways. For first-time readers, there is the unusual phenomenon that generalized knowledge about plot twists doesn’t allow you to spot one in a new work. When a twist narrative works well, readers aren’t able to bring their relevant prior knowledge to bear. Conversely, for rereaders, knowledge that they’re reading a twist narrative may be top of mind throughout the entire experience. Whereas Jauss uses the horizon of expectations to explain broad features of a work’s reception (e.g. outrage, acclaim) and literary impact (e.g. inspiring new trends or conventions), my focus is on how readers’ general knowledge contorts and transforms at various points while reading.

The complexities of generic knowledge concerning twist narratives don’t begin and end with times when people are moving their eyes across the page. Before we even begin to read a twist narrative, we need to know of the work’s existence, and know enough to be tempted to read it, but ideally we should not have an inkling that this work connects with what we know about twists. This delicate balance of knowledge and non-knowledge is only partially within an individual’s control, depending in large part on external factors like the careful restraint of friends or the vagaries of internet browsing. When we know too much beforehand, the conditions
of knowledge while reading a twist narrative also change, and we are in some ways more like a rereader, though lacking the memory of a misdirected first reading. Knowledge of twist narratives continues to be complicated after reading. We might discuss a twist with a friend who’s also read it, and both discover new unnoticed details, or perhaps even a plot hole. We might want people we know to read the book, but struggle to explain why without spoiling the twist. We might want to write about twist narratives, and worry about how to reconcile a mixed readership of people who do and don’t already know the plot. Who knows what about a twist never ceases to be a relevant question.

Evaluation is unavoidable in studying the plot twist. To construct a successful twist is a feat of narrative engineering. It means doing all the work of planning out a peripeteia, and then doing extra work to cover it up. It requires hitting on an astonishing narrative swerve like the deus ex machina, and then working backwards so that it seems not implausible and in fact like the only logical outcome. Twist narratives must occupy an unstable middle ground between peripeteia, which allows readers to understand everything about the situation upfront, and deus ex machina, which withholds understanding completely until the end. As such, to designate something as a twist narrative involves an element of evaluation. Whether or not a twist delights a particular person, there is a minimum level of craft, of effectively laying the groundwork, that must be successfully realized for a plot point to be recognizable as a twist. Whereas “cheap plot tricks” are by definition artistically deficient, plot twists are by definition at least competent.
Like a gymnast twisting on a balance beam, pulling off a plot twist at all means doing it somewhat well.¹⁰

* * *

This is the first book-length study of twist narratives within literary scholarship. Two other books on twist narratives already exist: one in film studies, the other in cognitive science. Willem Strank’s *Twist Endings: Umdeutende Film-Enden* has a strong typological and taxonomic drive, first defining the twist ending in relation to established scholarly concepts, second offering a chronological history of European and US American twists endings through exemplary movies, and finally presenting a typology of twists (e.g. “Wake-up Twist”, “Set-up Twist”).¹¹ His analyses of individual movies have a strong narratological flavor, carefully analyzing how disjunctions between *syuzhet* (the story as told) and *fabula* (the story as it actually occurred) enable twists, often with the use of tables and diagrams. Most valuable for my purposes is Strank’s analysis of narration in terms of *Informationsvergabe* (information provision): until audiences are given certain key pieces of information, a certain understanding of the movie is impossible; once given, this understanding is inevitable.

¹⁰ Ryan hints at the evaluative quality of plot twists when she notes that ‘plotting devices range on a continuum from cheap to brilliant,’ and names the far end of that continuum ‘brilliant plot twists.’ Ryan, p. 57, emphasis mine.

That said, a competent plot twist is not necessarily a high bar: in the TV comedy *30 Rock*, the fictional movie about “a moon scientist who’s trying to get to the bottom of things and who – spoiler alert – may herself be a werewolf” is, as a twist, competent but laughably unsubtle. (Beth McCarthy-Miller, ‘Into the Crevasse,’ *30 Rock* (Broadway Video, Little Stranger, Universal Media Studios (UMS), 2009.)

Vera Tobin’s *Elements of Surprise: Our Mental Limits and the Satisfactions of Plot* studies what the author calls “the well-made surprise plot,” which “aims to produce a flash reinterpretation of events together with the feeling that the evidence for this interpretation was there *all along* — the surprise should be not merely unexpected but also revelatory.”

Throughout the book and in other publications, Tobin makes clear that her “well-made surprise” is equivalent to a “plot twist.” Situated within cognitive science, her work’s primary focus is on “a feature of human thought” – surprise – and how plot twists mobilize the phenomenon called “the curse of knowledge,” which consists in “overprojection” based on limited knowledge. My own dissertation takes to heart Tobin’s even-handed judgment on our capacities as readers:

> The human mind is both endlessly dazzling and bottomlessly disappointing. Its limitations are frustrating, but they are also the source of some of the most impressive tools in a storyteller’s arsenal.

> Taken together, these two books emphasize that the initial misunderstandings produced by plot twists are not a failing on the part of readers but the twist working exactly as it should.

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These books differ from my project most significantly in their orientation to history. Tobin’s book, as is understandable for a work of cognitive science, has little to say about literary history, although all the major examples come (tellingly, I would argue) from the nineteenth century or later. Strank’s book presents a history of movie twists from the early twentieth century to the present, with a brief discussion of late nineteenth-century short stories as the immediate precursors. The chapters of his book situate twist movies in relation to chronologically consecutive phases of the industry (e.g. the silent era, classic Hollywood, arthouse). While my own chapters also follow a chronological sequence, my aim is not to situate individual narratives in relation to other contemporary literary works but in relation to historical readerships.

**The Plot Twist in the Nineteenth Century**

A survey of early plot twists could encompass the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Genesis* 22, the story of “The Three Apples” in the *Thousand and One Nights*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. In the twentieth century, plot twists have perhaps been most prominent in movies, from *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920) to *Psycho* (1960) to *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) to *The Sixth Sense* (1999). In the twenty-first century, twists have continued to proliferate. Twist movies from countries other than the US have become internationally successful: *Y tu mamá también* (2001, Mexico); *8 Femmes* (2002, France); *Oldboy* (2003, South Korea); *La mala educación* (2004, Spain); *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009, Argentina); and *Parasite* (2019, South Korea). Twists have featured prominently in various TV

shows (season 1 of *The Good Place*, season 1 of *Westworld*, *Game of Thrones*; individual episodes of *Black Mirror*); in table-top games (*Fiasco* (2009), *Leverage: The Roleplaying Game* (2010)); in video games (*Portal* (2007), *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017)); as well as in popular novels such as Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005) and Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012).\(^{16}\) Twists are by no means exclusive to the nineteenth century nor to Western Europe, appearing as a possibility for as long as there has been storytelling.

The history of the plot twist itself resembles a plot twist, and the twist occurred at the start of the twentieth century. While the *OED*’s first instance of the phrase “plot twist” comes from 1920 (and with the meaning of “twists and turns” rather than plot twist in the narrower sense), the earliest example I’ve found in the Google Books corpus dates back to 1916, when a theatre reviewer calls “the unexpected plot twist” a “favorite formula of the hour for playwrights,” before going on to explain the technique: “You get a surprise planned out, and then you write a play around it.”\(^ {17}\) Whether or not this was the first instance of the phrase, it points to the plot twist’s rise to cultural common knowledge around the start of the twentieth century. This is why I call my study of nineteenth-century twists a *pre*-history. And while the reviewer quoted above presented the plot twist as a new fad for playwrights, others were able to look backwards and see that twists had been with them all along throughout the previous century.\(^ {18}\) Just as the

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\(^{16}\) I’ve written essays on plot twists in the movies *Les Diaboliques* and *Psycho* as well as *Clue*: ‘On the Art of the Plot Twist,’ *CrimeReads*, 2021; ‘Clue or Red Herring? How Clue Shreds the Detective Rulebook,* BLARB, 2021.


\(^{18}\) For example, less than two years later, a young woman writing for an Indiana college magazine traces the current ‘era’ of twist narratives back to Maupassant’s ‘The Necklace’ (1884) and Thomas Bailey
revelation of a twist makes knowable things that were already the case, so the arrival of the term “plot twist” revealed a long-standing feature of literary history. While historicist literary scholarship new and old has drawn connections between disparate texts on the basis that they were produced around the same time, or that the earlier text prepared the way for the later one, my pre-history has necessitated a twist-like historical retrospection, asking what we can know now about the nineteenth century that people at the time could not have put into words.19

With the benefit of hindsight, then, the nineteenth century proved to be a remarkable period for plot twists, despite not having had a term for them. At the beginning of this period, the German Novelle genre, with its formalization of a single Wendepunkt (turning point) as the narrative climax, proved eminently compatible with a twist construction. Heinrich von Kleist’s “Die Marquise von O…” (1808) is among the best known examples today, and its final twist (that the thus-far inexplicably pregnant protagonist was raped while unconscious by a man with whom she has, in the mean time, fallen in love) still retains its power to shock. E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “Der Sandmann” (1816), discussed at length in Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny,” is another twist Novelle, in which the protagonist discovers the young woman he has admired from afar is in fact an automaton. In France, twist narratives appeared most prominently in short stories. In “Sarrasine” (1830) and “La Fille aux yeux d’or” (1835), Honoré de Balzac built twists around characters’ gender and sexuality, playing on readers’ conventional assumptions of cis-


19 In nineteenth-century reviews of Dickens novels and Daniel Deronda which I consulted, aspects of the plot twist are discussed with broader and vaguer terms like “revelation,” “surprise,” “secret” and “denouement.” I have not found instances where reviewers discuss these plots as a distinctive construction before the 1880s, as Ch.3 explores.
and heterosexuality. Prosper Mérimée’s taste for lurid dénouements led him to construct several twist narratives. In “La Vénus d’Ille,” the murder of a young man on his wedding night turns out to have been committed by an ancient and ominous Venus statue present at the scene. On a lighter note, “La Chambre bleue” (dated 1866; published posthumously in 1871), depicts a couple who believe they’ve witnessed a murder in the adjacent hotel room, only to learn the next morning that it was only the drunken stumblings of their neighbor. In Russia, Alexander Pushkin’s “The Blizzard” (1830) reworked elements of Kleist’s twist narrative by revealing that a young woman and her love interest were in fact already married years ago, when the woman fainted in a church. In the United States, Edgar Allan Poe’s stories such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) and “The Purloined Letter” (1844) were not only landmarks in the detective genre, but also specifically established an affinity between the plot twist and the detective’s solution. In Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s “Marjorie Daw” (1869), a man learns of the titular Marjorie through letters from a friend, and falls in love with her, only to learn that the friend invented Marjorie as a distraction for him. While not widely known today, the story’s twist was repeatedly discussed into the early twentieth century. At the turn of the twentieth century, O. Henry turned the twist narrative into a cottage industry, producing dozens if not hundreds of short stories closely resembling his most famous story “The Gift of the Magi” (1905).

Nineteenth-century Britain was unusual compared to its neighbors, in that the preferred vehicle for twists was not short fiction but the novel. Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Villette as well as many of Charles Dickens’s novels hinge on twists. Wilkie Collins’s The Moonstone delivers the twist that the titular gem was stolen by one of the detectives searching for it, while
In a more elite sphere, George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* builds to the revelation that Daniel is in fact Jewish, and can therefore marry the Jewish woman he is in love with, while Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* eventually reveals that the sinister Madame Merle is the mother of the protagonist’s stepdaughter. As the century wore on, there were also high-profile twists in shorter works such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* and several of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. Nonetheless, the length of twist narratives in nineteenth-century Britain made it an outlier. The prevalence of twist novels is somewhat surprising against the background of organicist novel theory, which held that aesthetic value resided in each part of the work having a crucial and distinctive function relative to the whole. On the one hand, the revelation of a twist might be seen as a force for cohesion, tying together disparate elements that had gone before; on the other, such a revelation renders the parts before it redundant, elevating the revelation itself as disproportionately important to the whole. Regardless of theories, novels provided more ample space for writers to craft surprising, effective twist narratives.

These are of course only the narratives that remain relatively well-known today. There were no doubt other twist narratives, especially as the century wore on, that were swiftly or slowly forgotten, and are therefore not easily discoverable now because nobody discussed them as “twists” at the time they actually had readers. There is in fact strong evidence that many now-forgotten twist narratives were once a fixture of the literary ecosystem. Commentators in the late

20 While sensation fiction in general is full of twists and turns, plot twists are relatively rare. The two are in fact connected: since the genre depends on delivering a constant stream of surprises, it rarely engages in the prolonged and comprehensive setup that defines a twist.

nineteenth and early twentieth century lamented that “Nine-tenths of all magazine stories depend for their effect on a trick plot” like that of Maupassant’s “The Necklace.” In 1919, The Editor, a magazine for (aspiring) professional writers, advised readers that “Young’s Magazine, as everyone knows, goes in for the O. Henry twist ending.” In turn-of-the-century Britain, “One of the most coveted successes for a short story writer was an acceptance by the Strand” magazine, where “It was especially desirable for stories to end with a ‘twist,’ after the fashion of O. Henry and Guy de Maupassant.” Evidently, then, this dissertation is not an exhaustive survey of nineteenth-century twist narratives.

Instead, I have focused on some of the best-known twist narratives across the period, because notoriety is itself a part of the history of this device. As the references to Maupassant and O. Henry in the previous paragraph indicate, a small pantheon of twist narratives were widely known, discussed and imitated. Moreover, because my focus is on readers, narratives that have enjoyed large readerships both in their own time and subsequently are on the face of it good candidates for analysis. It remains an open question, however, to what extent a few high-profile

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24 Christopher Hilliard, To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 18.

25 In addition to the now unread novels, novellas and short stories that I don’t address in this dissertation, I also don’t address twist narratives in theatre, though they are attested across the nineteenth century. Black-Eyed Susan (1829) was a popular comic play by Douglas Jerrold, in which a sailor hits his captain and is sentenced to death per navy rules, only to be spared when it is revealed that he was unknowingly discharged from the navy before striking the blow. More familiar today is Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest (1895), in which Jack discovers that the name Ernest, which he has adopted to seduce a woman fond of the name, was in fact his own legal name all along. No doubt there are many more twists to be found in the melodramas and pièces bien faites of nineteenth-century theatre.
twist narratives contributed to the crystallization of the device compared to the contributions of the countless undistinguished twist narratives that may in aggregate have reached as many or even more readers.

The history of the plot twist can be situated within a broader history of plot itself. The nineteenth century was a high point in the cultural status of unknown plots, by which I mean plots which readers do not expect to know in advance, in contrast to plots drawn from a shared repertoire (e.g. Ancient Greek myth or Biblical narrative) or plots whose outcome is made known in advance (e.g. the plot summaries on eighteenth-century novel title pages; the use of titles like *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* that announce a narrative arc). In the nineteenth century, the norm for novels and shorter fiction shifted to delivering plots that readers don’t already know. And while internal hints or genre knowledge still sometimes allowed readers to anticipate where a plot was heading, unknown plots created significant new scope for readers’ surprise. Whereas narrative surprise in eighteenth-century fiction had typically centered on characters, whose astonishment well-informed readers could observe with dramatic irony, surprising readers in ways both large and small became an increasingly used resource in nineteenth-century plots.26 The flourishing of twist narratives in this era, and their eventual crystallization into a named device, must be understood against this backdrop.

Around the start of the twentieth century, unknown plots entered a new phase. On the one hand, popular and genre fiction as well as movies continued to stake their appeal on the novelty of unknown plots, as they still do today. On the other hand, elite and avant-garde novelists

increasingly rejected plot as a driving force of their novels. Beginning with convention-defying French novelists Gustave Flaubert and Joris-Karl Huysmans, plotlessness moved via the later Henry James to become a shared aesthetic among early twentieth-century Modernist novelists such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Marcel Proust, Samuel Beckett, Robert Musil and Gertrude Stein. A minimization or rejection of plot can also be found in the poetry of this period, especially long poems, by Stéphane Mallarmé, T. S. Eliot and Aimé Césaire, and in plays by Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Maurice Maeterlinck. Instead, other aspects like lyricism, essayism or linguistic difficulty took over from plot as defining features of literary value. Insofar as the plot twist nowadays has connotations of popular and genre fiction, it is in large part because of the persistence of this bifurcation of plot’s status that occurred in the early twentieth century.

This bifurcation has also had a profound impact on literary scholarship, which emerged as an academic field within universities in this same period, and whose foundational statements and practices implicitly or explicitly adopted Modernist anti-plot aesthetic presuppositions. While the activity of “close reading” or “practical criticism,” initially developed for the analysis of short lyric poems, is now readily applied to novels and other text types, it has only an indirect purchase on questions of plot, confined as it is to short excerpted passages.27 By ending this dissertation in the early twentieth century, then, I also intend for it to speak to the present, and to our inherited scholarly methods and concepts that can only imperfectly do justice to the aesthetic achievements of plot.

Dissertation Overview

The dissertation traces a historical arc from the early 19th century, when twists were still a rare storytelling novelty, to the early 20th century, when twists became a well-known and widely repeated device. The content of the chapters to come is also organized according to various kinds of knowledge of twists.

The first two chapters examine what knowledge readers can attain by reading a twist narrative, in other words intrinsic knowledge derived from the object itself. Ch.1 focuses on first-time readers, while Ch.2 focuses on rereaders, terms I use as a shorthand for, respectively, readers who don’t yet know where the plot is headed and readers who do. These two chapters demonstrate how readers’ knowledge or non-knowledge of a twist affects reading experiences at the level of individual words and sentences, as well as broader expectations and thoughts about the overall plot.

In Ch.1, “Misdirecting Frames: *Emma*, First-Time Reading and the Art of the Setup,” I develop a theory of “misdirecting frames” to explain how Austen’s novel recruits first-time readers to collaborate unwittingly in their own deception. Like the novel’s “clever” protagonist Emma Woodhouse, first-time readers of this novel unknowingly contribute to the production of the twist. They do this not because they’re ignorant or lazy thinkers, but because they are active, intelligent thinkers operating within frames that misdirect them. The concept of framing, which I take from the social psychologist Erving Goffman, helps to explain how clues to the twist are able to “hide in plain sight.” What frame analysis shows is that an effective way to hide the twist is not by making the giveaway details seem insignificant, but on the contrary by presenting them as extremely significant, but within a different frame. I examine how multiple misdirecting frames are deployed in strategic positions to misdirect readers at crucial moments in the text.
when pivotal information has just been or is about to be given. The final section of this chapter turns to the revelation of the twist, and considers how first-time readers are offered a new frame and guided in how to apply it to the preceding events.

Ch.2, “Disillusioned Ironizing and Vicarious Crafting: Rereading *Great Expectations* for the Twist,” analyzes how rereaders who know the twist of Dickens’s novel can perceive previously inaccessible features of the narrative. The two features I focus on are irony among the characters and skillful plot construction by the author. For both features, readers actively (though in many cases unconsciously and effortlessly) engage in meaning-making activities which I call, respectively, disillusioned ironizing and vicarious crafting. In the former, readers mentally insert additional ironic narration into the narrative, with the basic form of “Little did I/he/she/they know…” Whereas disillusioned ironizing involves readers producing knowledge internal to the narrative’s diegesis, concerning what certain characters do and don’t know, and when, in vicarious crafting readers develop new ways of understanding the novel extra-diegetically, that is as a fictional object crafted by an author. In vicarious crafting, rereaders reflect that the given narrative, as a work of fiction, could have gone many other ways. What count as “facts” diegetically are also, extra-diegetically, matters of authorial choice and invention. Diegetic crafting involves readers assessing how the choices an author made contribute effectively (or not) to the eventual twist. By demonstrating these modes of rereading in action, the chapter argues that the value of a twist narrative is not exhausted in a single reading, but can give rise to sophisticated, creative rereadings.

The final two chapters turn to knowledge of twist narratives derived from sources outside the literary work itself. This extrinsic knowledge of twists became increasingly detailed and widespread in the final decades of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century,
shaping people’s expectations and experiences of twists. In particular, I examine how print media conveyed and even created information about specific twists as well as about the plot twist in general. It is through the new, rapidly expanding print ecosystem of this period that the plot twist came into being, developing from the occasional plot construction it had been earlier in the century, and for centuries before, into a well-known and widely replicated device.

Ch.3, “A Twist in Circulation: Summaries, Abstractions and Retellings of Maupassant’s ‘The Necklace,’” traces the social life of the plot of Maupassant’s short story “The Necklace” through news articles, fiction-writing manuals and popular fiction from the 1880s to the early 1920s. The story, often praised and sometimes criticized for its exceptional “compression,” underwent further compression as its plot was detached from the work in which it originated and circulated widely in schematic forms. As a result, from the 1880s onwards, people had many ways to learn about the twist of this story beyond simply reading it. Towards the end of this period, in the mid-1910s, the term “plot twist” started to be used for the first time. This chapter studies the preceding cultural activities that made the emergence of the term possible. Beyond twist narratives, I make the case that plots can circulate within a culture beyond simply the people who read it. Plots are detachable, portable, mobile. Correspondingly, I propose a broader conception of who counts as a “reader” of a plot, or more abstractly who counts as a possessor of literary knowledge.

Ch.4, “The Pre-Reading Environment: Ackroyd, Dalloway and the Cultural Management of Endings,” examines the start of a new era, after the plot twist had been born. Once the plot twist had become a well-known and frequently-repeated device, new cultural strategies needed to emerge to manage potential readers’ advance knowledge, particularly around the problem of what we now call plot “spoilers.” When even a single word (“twist”) can pre-emptively thwart
the kind of first-time reading experiences outlined in Ch.1, keeping information about the twist away from potential readers became newly urgent and demanded subtler strategies. In this chapter, I develop the concept of the “pre-reading environment,” referring to the range of information about a literary work potentially available to a historically-specific community. Examining the information that was – and, especially in the case of twists, wasn’t – in circulation can tell us about the contours of potential readers’ foreknowledge, as well as the aesthetic presuppositions of those circulating the information. My focus in this chapter is how newspaper reviewers protected initial readers from spoilers about Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). As a counterpoint to *Ackroyd*, I compare the pre-reading environment for Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), another novel with an innovative, convention-defying ending. By considering *Ackroyd* and *Dalloway* side-by-side, I register a new phase not only in the history of the plot twist but in the history of plot: a divergence between the resistance to plot in Modernist, and more broadly elite literary culture, and the plottedness of popular and genre fiction.

These final two chapters focus on extrinsic knowledge derived from print media because the emergence of the plot twist depended on this cultural support. Individual twist narratives like “The Necklace” and *Ackroyd* existed in a symbiotic relationship with the media, and people acquired knowledge of these narratives not only from reading them first-hand but also second-hand through summaries, references, reviews and advertisements. This second-hand knowledge of literary works deserves to be taken seriously for two reasons. First, because its distance from the work itself gives it a schematic quality that mediates between the specific features of a single literary work and the general features of a device or construction common to many works. Additionally, second-hand knowledge constitutes a large proportion of the literary knowledge
any given person has: reading takes time, and second-hand knowledge allows us to know about a far wider range of literary works and categories than we could attain by reading alone. While these final two chapters downplay eyes-on-the-page reading, however, my aim is not to diminish the activity of reading but to investigate the epistemic conditions that make possible, or pre-emptively thwart, specific reading experiences of twist narratives.

A further reason these final chapters look beyond the act of reading is to shift emphasis to the sociality of literary knowledge. Eyes-on-the-page reading is a solitary image, and does not in fact cover the full range of reading experiences: we might picture a group listening to someone reading aloud as a reminder that reading can be social even at the moment it’s happening. In the latter two chapters, however, I turn to phases before and after reading as additional phases where literary knowledge is produced and transmitted. Newspapers and other print media are my main sources in these chapters as a proxy for something more intangible: the social life of literature. The discussions of twist narratives I present from these sources need to be understood as functioning alongside conversations between friends, family, neighbors, colleagues, teachers, students, strangers… While the first two chapters investigate the complicated ways that twist narratives play with readers’ knowledge, the latter two chapters show that twist narratives must not be considered in an informational vacuum: what readers do or don’t know always involves more than just the text in front of them.

While each chapter takes a single twist narrative as a case study, I intend for the central concepts developed in each chapter to contribute to a toolkit for understanding twist narratives in general. I see in misdirecting frames (Ch.1), the two modes of rereading (Ch.2), the function of plot summary (Ch.3) and the pre-reading environment (Ch.4) the potential to illuminate twists of other times and in other media, since questions of first-time vs repeated experience and second-
hand knowledge before and afterwards will always be relevant. I take inspiration here from Gérard Genette, who developed many of the foundational concepts for narratology on the basis of a study of a single novel (Proust’s *Recherche*), and who explained that the “specificity” of a single narrative “is not *undeecomposable*.” Proust’s novel “is made up of elements that are […] transindividual, which it assembles into a specific synthesis.”\(^{28}\) Four narratives can’t tell us everything about the plot twist, but they can take us well beyond themselves.

**Scholarly Contexts and Contributions**

I situate the overall dissertation in relation to a body of scholarship on the temporality of reading. The most directly relevant work to my project concerns the temporality of *literary* reading, and more specifically *narrative* reading, although the topic cuts across numerous theoretical schools and subfields within the discipline of literary studies. There are also studies of reading by historians, sociologists and psychologists that have centered temporality. Research questions that have been or could be raised concerning the temporality of reading include: what is the role of duration, sequence, tempo or intermittency in a reading experience? How do literary works live on in readers’ minds? What are the distinctive features of reading beginnings, middles or endings? How does rereading, or even multiple rereadings, relate to first-time reading? When do people read, or when do they have time to read? How do various kinds of prior knowledge shape reading experiences? How does a person’s reading look at the scale of seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years or even decades? Why have certain poets, novelists and scholars aspired to transcend or minimize the time reading takes? What personal or cultural preconditions must already be in place for certain narrative experiences to become likely or even

possible? How do the temporalities of reading as depicted in scholarly writing relate to scholars’ own reading experiences? In short, scholarship that investigates the when of reading. While it is overall still common for literary scholarship to minimize or ignore temporality altogether, my

dissertation contributes to this body of scholarship that insists our understanding of narrative and reading is incomplete without attending to time.

What my study adds to the scholarship cited above is an emphasis on the temporal complexities of reader’s knowledge. Twist narratives produce distinctive configurations of knowledge at various points during the reading process, beginning even before people pick up a book and begin to read, shifting several times as readers are misdirected, discover the twist, reread (or mentally revisit) the events that came before, and then reflect on or discuss the narrative afterwards. Particularly distinctive is the initial cultivation of a peculiar kind of not-knowing in readers: while these readers should not know anything about the twist, including that there is one, they must also be carefully prepared for the twist without their awareness. My study of twist narratives thus reveals the broader importance to our reading lives of what we know, and especially don’t know, when.

The dissertation thus also opens out onto more general questions about knowledge, perhaps more typically the domain of philosophy and psychology. How do we know what we know? Might we be deceived in our knowledge? Can tracing the origins of the things we believe we know help clarify their reliability? What happens when pieces of knowledge appear contradictory, or when something we thought we knew turns out to be an illusion? What is the difference between having information and knowing a fact, and by what procedures do people transform information into knowledge? What role do “known unknowns” and “unknown unknowns” play in our epistemic lives? These questions about knowledge and how it relates to,

\[30\] These expressions originate with Donald Rumsfeld, and have since taken on substantial irony. While the eventual news that all along there had been no WMDs in Iraq might have come as a plot twist to members of the public, Rumsfeld evoked “unknown unknowns” to stoke unfounded fears.
in particular, textual or verbal information, are ones to which my dissertation may make a modest contribution.

This mention of knowledge-making procedures unrelated to literature relates to another aim of this project: to center what I call ordinary reading. For my purposes, ordinary reading is reading that takes place under the constraints of everyday human cognition, with all its forgetfulness, inattention and impatience. Whereas the reading that scholars engage in attempts to minimize such limitations through slow, careful, repeated readings, this is not the kind of reading that twist narratives are written for. My object of study has thus led me to share the conviction that “the lives and literacies of ordinary people might usefully challenge the ways in which knowledge is constructed within the academy.”

In the first two chapters, the generalized first-time readers and rereaders I present are “ordinary” in that they have fallible memories, don’t attend closely to every word and are susceptible to misreadings. As a consequence, my own accounts of Emma and Great Expectations attempt to strike a balance between the close, attentive scrutiny of the words on the page typical of scholarly reading and the more fallible, unsystematic qualities of ordinary reading. My aim is not to reconcile these two, but rather to convey the sophistication and thoughtfulness that ordinary readers can, at times, display. It’s perhaps worth stating that scholars are ordinary readers too: while our reading practices and the ways we translate them

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I’m undecided whether “ordinary” is the best descriptor for such readers and reading. Other options include “common”, “everyday”, “lay”, “uncritical,” “non-specialist,” all of which strike me as potentially more misleading, however.
into writing may approach the perfect memory, unflagging attention and encyclopaedic
knowledge to which we aspire, what actually happens when we have a literary work before our
eyes is much closer to the ordinary reading I present in these chapters. My account of ordinary
readings of these novels is of course an artifice, but it is no more artificial than the close readings
of much literary scholarship, which may pass themselves off as transcripts of real reading
experiences but are far removed from what actually happened when the scholar moved their eyes
across the page.\textsuperscript{32} In the latter two chapters, the writers I examine in various kinds of print media
may not be entirely ordinary, due to their professional status, but they are nonetheless a direct
interface with ordinary readers.

An additional contribution of this project is to unsettle some long-standing conventions
within the discipline of literary study concerning the value of reading, ambiguity and scholarly
interpretation. \textit{Rereadability} has often functioned as the implicit or explicit criterion of literary
value: in this view, a work that repays endless rereadings is worth reading, and studying, whereas
a work that is engaging only once is mere disposable entertainment.\textsuperscript{33} Relatedly, interpretive
ambiguity has been prized, allowing for multiple interpretations of the same work that don’t
undermine each other but satisfyingly reconfigure the text’s ever-undecidable ambiguities. The
value placed on rereadable, ambiguous literary works has the benefit of positioning scholars as
privileged, necessary interpreters of works that would otherwise be imperfectly understood.
Whether helpfully explicating a cryptic text or ingeniously revealing new meaning in texts that


\textsuperscript{33} For an alternative conception that locates literary value not in rereadability but in accessibility to future
first-time readers, see Michaela Bronstein, \textit{Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction}, Modernist
seemed self-evident, scholars analyzing such texts demonstrably add to understanding.

Moreover, each scholar’s “reading” of a work becomes a distinctive contribution over which they can claim intellectual ownership.

Twist narratives, evidently, do not satisfy these standards. Much of their effect resides in an unrepeatable first reading, and while a second reading may be intriguing to see how the writer pulled off the surprise, further rereadings of twist narratives, if they occur at all, are likely to be rewarding for reasons other than the plot, such as Austen’s style or Dickens’s characterization. Twist narratives also leave little room for ambiguity, at least as far as the twist is concerned. When a twist is revealed, it thoroughly undermines the earlier understanding of events. There is little scope for readers to reject the revelation and reaffirm their previous understanding of the narrative.34 In short, there can be little disagreement afterwards about what really happened in the plot. Indeed, scholars may recognize twist narratives as in some sense already doing the scholar’s work for them, guiding readers through a reinterpretation of the work that leaves nothing for a scholar to add. To offer an original, counter-intuitive “reading” of a twist narrative would be to miss the point.35

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34 There are certain works where the plot construction resembles a twist, but additional layers of interpretive difficulty make it hard to be certain whether a twist really occurred or what the twist was. I’m thinking of works like Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*. These marginal cases are instructive in showing by contrast how interpretively unambiguous the majority of twist narratives are.

35 An instructive exception here is Pierre Bayard’s book-length reading against the grain of Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which he makes the case that – contrary to the final confession – it was not the narrator but the narrator’s sister whodunit. While the textual scrutiny and interpretive ingenuity are impressive, it is not so much a contribution to understanding this novel as an attempt to arrogant to the scholar the same astonishment that Christie’s twist had produced in readers. See Pierre Bayard, *Qui a Tué Roger Ackroyd?*, Paradoxe (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1998).
For this reason, the chapters that follow don’t engage in extensive interpretation of the works discussed. While these works have certainly sustained many diverging interpretations over the years, the twists within them have not. I also therefore engage only minimally with the interpretive traditions surrounding these works. Instead of interpretations (what does this word/character/event/description mean or represent or symbolize?), I focus on what psychologists of reading have called the “comprehension” of a text, an ostensibly simpler, preliminary process in which readers establish what is going on within a work. I take inspiration from Elaine Auyoung’s suggestion to treat “comprehension not as a stepping stone on the path to interpretive meaning but as an aesthetic end in itself.”

And while comprehension too can be complex (think of the challenges of comprehending a Mallarmé poem or a novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet), in the twist narratives I study, comprehension is deceptively simple. First-time readers are mis directed effectively precisely because they feel very clear on what’s happening, while rereaders can easily keep the twist in mind as they reread. After reading, a twist readily coalesces into a simple, compact “all along…” summary. In contrast to these prolonged phases of stable comprehension, only the revelation provides an intense, momentary unsettling of comprehension. Overall, then, comprehension rather than interpretation is where we must look to understand the workings of twist narratives.


37 The distinction between comprehension and interpretation may recall distinctions between ‘paranoid’ and ‘reparative’ reading (Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You’); between ‘surface’ and ‘symptomatic’ reading (Best and Marcus); or between ‘critical’ and ‘post-critical’ reading (Rita Felski, The Limits of Critique (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015)). While there are certainly strong parallels, these modes of reading are fully-fledged methodologies, often with a distinctive ethos or even worldview attached. Moreover, they are proposed with the aim of effecting a shift in scholarly practice. In contrast, comprehension and interpretation are much smaller-scale activities that all readers are able to engage in,
It may be helpful to give some examples of what “interpretations” of twist narratives might be. *Emma* could be interpreted as a commentary on the gendered nature of epistemology. *Great Expectations* could be read in relation to anxieties around class mobility and inheritance in the mid-nineteenth century. The dazzling but deceptive jewels of “The Necklace” could be read as allegorizing the story’s narrative procedure, or perhaps even fictionality itself. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* could be taken as a performance of the inherent instability of meaning in all language. Other scholars may want to approach twist narratives in this way, and my arguments here by no means rule it out, but I’m making a different kind of argument.

For literary scholars, a methodological ur-text is Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, in which interpretation involves transforming elements within a dream into something they’re not. And while the quip “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” may be apocryphal, it points to the fact that we may sometimes want to consider a twist simply as a twist, not as standing for something else, something seemingly more important. As my own goal is to develop concepts that have general applicability, interpretations of individual twists are unhelpful because inevitably sui generis. While the narratives I study often mobilize political and ideological concepts (gender and class, first and foremost) as part of their twists, I don’t ultimately offer political or ideological readings of these narratives. The plot twist as such does not have an inherent politics and toggle between based on the moment-to-moment demands of the text. By centering comprehension in this dissertation, I’m therefore not proposing a new reading method but rather aiming to emphasize that when it comes to plot twists this aspect of reading is by no means straightforward.


or ideology: it has been used in service of both emancipation and oppression, as a weapon of the weak and as flattery for those in power. My aim is to understand how a construction works that has been put to such varied purposes.
Chapter 1. Misdirecting Frames: *Emma*, First-Time Reading and the Art of the Setup

**Introduction: What’s Going on When you First Read *Emma***?

Con artists know well that you can best deceive a mark not by bamboozling them but by recruiting them as an active, but unwitting, collaborator in their own deception. You can divert doubt and distrust by giving the mark a strong sense that they know what’s going on, and that they want it to happen. But in fact the mark knows what’s going on only superficially: there’s a scheme within the scheme, a plot within the plot.

There’s a parallel here with readers’ immersion in fictional narratives, which call on our imagination to flesh out as real what is in fact a fabrication. In particular, twist narratives invite readers to anticipate and invest in one outcome, only to find that they’ve been mistaken not only about the particular ending but about far more important elements: character history and motivations, the reliability and situation of the narrator, even what kind of story they’re in – tragedy or comedy, social satire or supernatural thriller. When readers don’t enjoy a twist, the negative feelings may resemble those of people who discover they’ve been the victim of a long con: resentment, certainly, but mixed with self-blame at their own role in the deception. Conversely, the exhilarating delight readers feel at a twist they enjoy may be heightened by their sense of having collaborated in producing the illusion. Experiencing a twist can be like discovering you’ve been unwittingly helping to plan your own surprise party.

In this chapter, I examine the mechanisms by which this involuntary collaboration occurs. This means taking seriously the setup for a twist, which is all too readily forgotten or cast aside once a reader reaches the big reveal. In contrast, I focus in detail on the reciprocal relationship between strategies within the text and the activities of first-time readers as they encounter these
strategies. These readers are misdirected not because they’re foolish but, more surprisingly, because they’re making inferences about the story that are well grounded in the understanding available to them at the time. In my account, first-time readers of twists are engaged in a cognitively sophisticated collaboration with the text, all the more delicate because they mustn’t realize they’re doing it.

My case study is the 1816 novel *Emma* by Jane Austen, a novel which has generated extensive critical and scholarly discussion of its style, characters, ethics and politics, but surprisingly little of its plot twists. (Numerous direct movie adaptations as well as the 1995 movie *Clueless* attest to the enduring appeal of its plot, however.) Fittingly, *Emma* is a novel in which the “handsome, clever and rich” protagonist comes to realize she knew less than she thought. An enthusiastic matchmaker, Emma discovers in the course of the novel that none of the matches she attempts to bring about (including her own) work out as planned. The errors arise from Emma and the characters around her consistently misframing – sometimes unconsciously, sometimes calculatedly – the situations and people they encounter.

My analysis of the mechanisms for misdirection centers on what I call “misdirecting frames.” I take the concept of frames from social psychologist Erving Goffman, who uses the term to refer to externally provided resources which allow a person to answer the question “what’s going on here?” in relation to a social situation. For individuals navigating social life, frames are extremely helpful, most of the time. However, Goffman also taxonomizes cases of framing errors, ranging from self-induced misunderstandings to deception by others and – most importantly for my purposes – unwitting collusion in other people’s misframings (including long cons and surprise parties). Goffman’s frame analysis thus offers a vocabulary and method for analyzing an aspect of reading that literary scholars have little studied to date.
My focus in this first chapter is on the frames that the text itself makes available to first-time readers for the purposes of misdirection. As such, my concern is primarily with readers and not with characters per se, although first-time readers’ experiences do substantially resemble Emma’s own, in large part due to Austen’s celebrated “free indirect” narration, which blends Emma’s words and perceptions into the ostensibly authoritative language of the narrator. Yet the novel’s misdirection of readers goes beyond the confinement to Emma’s perspective: my analysis of the novel’s setup shows that even a reader alert to Emma’s fallibility nonetheless encounters details crucial to the twist accompanied by frames that attribute completely different significance to them. We might expect authors of twist narratives to distract readers’ attention away from giveaway details; in fact, what we find in *Emma* (and will find again in works discussed in later chapters) is that crucial details are foregrounded, but within misdirecting frames.

I take *Emma* to have three substantial plot twists, all concerned with Emma’s matchmaking. First, that the eligible bachelor Mr Elton, whom she tries to set up with her friend

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40 This chapter presupposes a “linear” reader in Christina Lupton’s terms, though as we’ll see, once the twist is revealed the reading experience becomes decidedly nonlinear. (Lupton, p. 95.)

In reality, of course, readers may draw on many other sources to understand “what’s going on” at a given moment in a novel – knowledge of genre conventions, a Wikipedia or Sparknotes plot summary, the memory of a movie adaptation they’ve already seen… While Chapters 3 and 4 will focus on how such externally-derived knowledge interacts with reading experiences, here I isolate the internal mechanisms of a twist narrative so as to understand what’s going on in a successful setup to a twist.

41 By “free indirect” narration I mean third-person narration which includes language deriving from a specific character’s utterances or consciousness without explicitly stating the fact. “He was charming” (free indirect) vs. “Emma thought he was charming” (standard third-person). The character whose language the narration absorbs is typically called the “focalizer,” a term I’ll use occasionally in the pages to come. On free indirect narration in general, see Monika Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction: The Linguistic Representation of Speech and Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003). On Austen’s free indirect narration see D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or, The Secret of Style* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2003).
Harriet, has all along been in love with Emma herself. Second, that handsome Frank Churchill, who Emma believes is hoping to marry her, has all along been engaged to the poor but accomplished Jane Fairfax. Third, that family friend Mr. Knightley had all along been in love with Emma, and she, without knowing it, with him. Each of these is set up for first-time readers using misdirecting frames.

I offer a compact example from the first twist here. After a day spent contriving to bring Mr. Elton and Harriet together, Emma observes that Mr. Elton “does sigh and languish” and that she herself “come[s] in for a pretty good share” of it. Later events will reveal to Emma that Mr. Elton is indeed “languishing” for her and her alone, but the paragraph in which readers encounter this hint, it is preceded by the statement that Mr. Elton “will suit Harriet exactly,” and followed by the rationalization that his attention to Emma “is his gratitude on Harriet’s account.”42 For readers consciously or unconsciously asking what’s going on here, an answer is ready to hand: Elton desires Harriet. In the analyses that follow, I’ll represent these frames that answer the question “what’s going on here?” in the form of hyphenated phrases (e.g. Elton-desires-Harriet). This is to signal that these frames are one degree removed from the verbatim text. They are slightly abstracted from the words on the page, but are constantly being evoked by the words readers encounter accompanying hints at the twist.

The rest of this chapter will focus on the Frank-and-Jane-engaged twist, since it offers the most extensive and sustained misdirection of the three (the Elton-desires-Emma twist is over by the end of Volume 1; the Knightley-loves-Emma twist remains largely in the background until

the novel’s end). In addition, because the twist arises from a combination of Frank’s deliberate
dechections and unintended misframings on Emma’s part, this plotline allows us to observe how
misdirection among characters overlaps with but is not identical to misdirection of readers.

This chapter’s first section presents the theory and method of frame analysis I apply to
understand Emma’s misdirections, drawing on Goffman’s foundational work and adapting it for
the methods of literary scholarship. The second section presents two aspects of how misdirecting
frames operate in Emma: first, the deployment of many unrelated frames to misdirect from one
single secret; second, the positioning of misdirecting frames at the start and end of chapters and
paragraphs, while hints of the twist are positioned mid-chapter and mid-paragraph. The third
section studies the cognitive and affective dimensions of the twist’s revelation, as new frames
allow Emma and readers to reinterpret earlier events.

I conclude the chapter by suggesting what the study of misdirecting frames can offer to
the existing but scattered theories of first-time reading. Beyond making sense of how plot twists
work, this chapter – and the concept of misdirecting frames – contributes to a nascent theory of
first-time reading. Literary theories of reading – as well as the “readings” of literary works
offered in scholarship – have tended to endorse Vladimir Nabokov’s position that

one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an
active and creative reader is a rereader. […] When we read a book for the first time
[…] the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about,
this stands between us and artistic appreciation.\textsuperscript{43}

Returning repeatedly to a book to produce ever more artful, insightful, virtuosic readings
of it is one way scholars justify the value of what they do. This is inadequate when it comes to

understanding plot twists, and in this chapter I demonstrate how active and creative first-time readers are, even when they don’t yet know exactly what they’re doing.

1.1 Frames in Life and Literature

In this section, I present key elements of Erving Goffman’s conception of frames, and his method of frame analysis, as he developed them for real-life matters of perception, expectation and social activity. In particular, I gather together his scattered remarks on the use of frames for deception (including self-deception). I then outline my adaptation of Goffman’s method for the purposes of analyzing a literary work, and situate literary frame analysis in relation to existing methods of close reading and genre study.

1.1.1 Framing, Misframing and Fabricated Frames in Everyday Life

As the title of Goffman’s book suggests, his project is not to offer a rigorous definition of frames but to develop a method for analyzing them. As such, what frames actually are is left somewhat under-specified in Goffman’s account. Instead, he begins by asking how individuals produce a “definition of the situation” for events in the world that they encounter, experience or engage in.44 For Goffman, this process of defining is a situation is summed up in the question “what is it that’s going on here?”:

Whether asked explicitly, as in times of confusion and doubt, or tacitly, during occasions of usual certitude, […] Starting, then, with that question, this volume attempts to limn out a framework that could be appealed to for the answer.45


45 Goffman, p. 8.
Goffman’s aim is “to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events”:\(^46\)

I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify. That is my definition of frame.\(^47\)

You may sense some circularity here: Goffman’s definition of frames hinges on what the analyst can “identify” or “isolate.” Are frames just in the eye of the beholder/analyst? In fact, this agnostic approach to the nature of frames is – I take it – a principled stance. Rather than deciding a priori what a frame is, Goffman approaches frames in terms of their function. Does an underlying “principle” play a role in how a person defines or experiences an event? Then it’s a frame. Indeed, the noun “frame” somewhat obscures the fact that for Goffman frames are less a thing than an action. Not frames, then, but framing.

On the one hand, framing concerns an “individual” and “subjective” assessment of what’s going on. On the other hand, the situations to be made sense of are “social,” and Goffman stresses that the frames themselves are also social in origin: “those who are in the situation ordinarily do not create this definition, even though their society often can be said to do so.”\(^48\) Nevertheless, the focus of frame analysis is on what an individual actor can take into his mind – and not the organization of society. […] I am not addressing the structure of social life but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives.\(^49\)

\(^{46}\) Goffman, p. 10.

\(^{47}\) Goffman, pp. 10–11.

\(^{48}\) Goffman, p. 1.

\(^{49}\) Goffman, p. 13.
In other words, frame analysis helps explain how an individual uses socially-constructed materials to make sense of social situations. For example, an individual doesn’t invent the idea of theatrical performance, but can use it to make sense of what’s going on on a stage.

The “analysis of social reality”\(^{50}\) in terms of frames allows Goffman to capture, for example, the very different (but equally valid) answers given to the question “what is going on here?” by a golfer and a caddy side-by-side on a golf course (“play” for the former, “work” for the latter) or two people at a party where the one is being celebrated and the other ignored.\(^{51}\)

Individual experiences are the focus, then, and from the outset Goffman’s frame analysis leads to reflection on the limitations of the individual human mind: “My perspective is situational, meaning here a concern for what one individual can be alive to at a particular moment.”\(^{52}\) Readers familiar with *Emma* may already sense the relevance of Goffmanian framing to events depicted within the novel. Again and again, Emma discovers belatedly that she has been “alive at a particular moment” only to a very limited understanding of the situation. Her answer in the moment to the question “what’s going on here?” proves inadequate. The wrong frame has distorted her view.

The parallels run deeper. Beyond identifying “basic frameworks of understanding,” Goffman aims in particular to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject. […] from an individual’s particular point of view, while one thing may momentarily appear to be what is really going on, in fact what is actually happening is plainly a

\(^{50}\) Goffman, p. 2.

\(^{51}\) Goffman, pp. 8, 9–10.

\(^{52}\) Goffman, p. 8.
joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance, and so forth. And attention will be directed to what it is about our sense of what is going on that makes it so vulnerable to the need for these various rereadings.\textsuperscript{53}

As stated above, this chapter is not about \textit{rereadings} of \textit{Emma}, but it does focus on these drastic shifts in “point of view” that occur \textit{during} a first reading of the novel, where readers – together with Emma – discover that “what was really going on” was all along quite different from what they believed. A plot twist, in other words.

Despite an investment in social “reality,” the bulk of Goffman’s book analyzes cases where an individual’s sense of reality is misplaced: “fraud, deceit, con games, shows of various kinds” but also cases of self-induced misperception and misunderstanding due to misapplied frames.\textsuperscript{54} “The individual, it is true, can be ‘wrong’ in his interpretations, that is, misguided, out of touch, inappropriate, and so forth,”\textsuperscript{55} and although such mistakes are rare in the grand scheme of things, “one can learn how our sense of ordinary reality is produced by examining something that is easier to become conscious of, namely, how reality is mimicked and/or how it is faked.”\textsuperscript{56}

Whereas stage acting and rehearsals, for example, “mimic” reality, Goffman’s term for framings that “fake” reality is “fabrications.” In a fabrication, “one or more individuals” attempt “to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on.” When successful, it leads to “a falsification of some part of the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{53} Goffman, p. 10.
\bibitem{54} Goffman, p. 14.
\bibitem{55} Goffman, p. 50.
\bibitem{56} Goffman, p. 275.
\end{thebibliography}
world.” Fabrications can be “benign” (e.g. a surprise party) or “exploitative” (e.g. a con). Frank Churchill’s deception of Emma to cover up for his secret engagement to Jane is certainly a fabrication, though whether it’s benign or exploitative (or how much of each) is debatable.

Besides the distinction between benign and exploitative, fabrications can be analyzed in terms of being “other-induced” or “self-imposed.” The distinction, however, is not absolute, and the gray areas are especially relevant when it comes to both Emma’s characters and the novel’s readers:

in various ways the individual may actively work against his own capacity for effective framing, setting himself against his own ability to realistically orient himself in the world. In some cases he may obtain help in his misconstruings from persons teamed up with or against him, and in some cases they themselves may not be deluded about what is going on, having intentionally laid the groundwork for it. We might think here of Emma’s hypothesis of unrequited love between Jane and Mr Dixon encouraged by Frank who knows it to be false, or Harriet believing Mr Elton to love her based on Emma’s sincere but mistaken conviction. And beyond characters colluding unwittingly in their own deception or delusion, I propose that we think of twist narratives – and indeed narratives in general – as agents that dramatically reshape a reader’s sense of “what’s going on.”

There are thus two basic kinds of fabrication: deception (“falsehood intendedly produced by persons not taken in by their own fabrication”) and “delusion” or “self-deception” (“wrongheadedness actively aided, if not solely produced, by the head that is wrong”). Another

57 Goffman, p. 107.
58 Goffman, p. 140.
59 Goffman, p. 131.
60 Goffman, p. 136.
possibility closely related to these fabrications is “error resulting from a misconstruing that no one induced purposely,” which Goffman calls “illusion” or “misframing.” In such cases where “no person’s presentations can be seen as motivated by an intent to deceive,” blame is harder to attribute. In cases of misframing:

as in the case of fabrications, the individual’s situation can collapse, disintegrate, go up in smoke, but although a definition of the situation is discredited, persons aren’t, unless it is the definer himself who feels he was acting with less care and discrimination than is required in daily living.

Whereas deception attaches blame to the deceiver, and self-deception attaches blame to the person themselves (and perhaps witting or unwitting accomplices), misframing might lead to a degree of self-blame for lacking adequate “care and discrimination” but might also be deemed “understandable in the circumstances.” Precisely this question troubles Emma in the aftermath of both the Harriet-Elton and Frank-Jane revelations. Part of this retrospective doubt about culpability rests in the fact that misframing overrides “vagueness and uncertainty” and thus

Instead of merely stopping short to try to figure out what is happening, the individual actually lodges himself in certitude and/or action on the basis of wrong premises.

Until misframing is revealed (or “discredited” in Goffman’s terminology), the individual’s account of what’s going on feels indisputably right.

Deception, delusion and misframing are useful concepts for elucidating the many misunderstandings between characters in Emma, but can also be applied to readers’ experiences of the novel’s plot twists. Certainly, the twists all count as fabrications by the author/narrator for

61 Goffman, pp. 136, 326.
62 Goffman, p. 136.
63 Goffman, p. 332.
the benefit of readers. I’m not interested in classifying them as “benign” or “exploitative,” but the distinction helps capture how with any plot twist an individual reader may feel delighted or cheated after the fact. Similarly, categorizing plot twists as “self-imposed” or “other-induced” seems less productive than considering how plot twists complicate (already complicated) questions of readers’ agency vs passivity.

A final aspect of Goffman’s account of fabrications with particular relevance to plot twists is his remarks on temporality. Given that framing is by and large successful in daily life,

one can ask about the conditions under which long-term misframing might be possible. Presumably errors are less common than ambiguities, even short-lived errors, if only because the action the individual introduces on false assumptions is likely in itself to create contradictions and add to the likelihood of his detecting that (and how) he has gone wrong. Nonetheless, lengthy error is possible.

Thinking about plot twists, one reason readers may be so effectively misdirected is that in life in general prolonged misframings are rare, and tend to self-correct once they clash with contradictory aspects of our surroundings. For this reason, simply lasting a long time seems to speak for the credibility of a particular framing.

However long a frame has lasted, once it’s discredited it creates further temporal complications:

The discrediting that occurs may retrospectively and prospectively undermine a linked series of prior occasions and anticipated ones. When a mark tumbles to what has been happening in the Big Con and sees things for what they are, he sees that a whole sequence of past meetings and planned future ones involve a concerted fabrication.

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64 Goffman, p. 345.

65 Goffman, p. 145.
More broadly, with both fabrications and misframings, “whenever a discrediting occurs, it will have a backward and forward reach, sometimes long, sometimes short, but a reach nonetheless.”\textsuperscript{66} I stated above that misdirecting frames have been used to facilitate other plot twists besides \textit{Emma}’s. In light of Goffman’s comments, fabricated frames and misframing seem to have a structural parallel with the plot twist. While misdirecting frames can certainly be used for other purposes in a work of literature, Goffman’s account suggests a special affinity with the plot twist. Or put the other way, fictional plot twists seem to correspond to a deep-seated aspect of how we experience social life.

1.1.2 Frames in Literature: Meaning-Making Between Close Reading and Genre

In literature as in life, a person can pause at any moment while reading and ask themselves “what is going on here?” As in life, when we feel “certitude” about what’s going on, we may not phrase the framing as a question and simply think to ourselves “what’s going on here is…” Like Goffman, I approach frames functionally: any element in a work of literature that provides an answer to the question “what’s going on here?” can count as a frame.

Works of literature vary as to how frequently and intensely they prompt this question in readers. A reader of \textit{Ulysses} may inflect the question with confusion (\textit{what} is going on here?), a reader of a whodunit with suspicion (\textit{what} \textit{is} going on here?). These readers may scrutinize the current sentence more closely or flip back to earlier pages in search of an answer. Other works seem designed to raise the question as little as possible: Roland Barthes’s account of classical realism as “readable” might be understood functionally as a text that at all times answers the

\textsuperscript{66} Goffman, pp. 145–46.
question on readers’ behalf. Emma for the most part makes it easy for readers not to consciously ask what’s going on, only to discover later that the frame that seemed to settle the question was inadequate. Indeed, if readers began asking the question too intently it might give the game away. Emma’s frames settle the question before it needs to be asked.

I need to say a little more about the word “here.” In relation to a work of literature, “here” can have at least two senses: here in the fictional world (i.e. diegetic) or here in this novel (extra-diegetic). Two distinct answers can thus be given for the same moment, for example “Mr Elton contrives to ride alone with Emma” vs “Austen contrives to have Elton and Emma ride alone together.” These two different framings are both accounts of what’s going on at that particular moment. As I’ll discuss, in Emma the distinction between diegetic and extra-diegetic frames is made unusually elusive (in particular for first-time readers) through free indirect discourse.

Emma is a complex case study for framing as a method to analyze literature, since Austen’s novel both depicts all kinds of misframing and fabrications leading to misunderstandings between characters and also itself misframes events for first-time readers. I want to be clear that in this chapter my primary focus is on readers and the novel; instances of misframing among characters are only indirectly relevant via techniques of focalization and free indirect discourse. Though there are many remarks in Goffman’s book that uncannily echo specific situations in Emma, my project is not to give a Goffmanian account of characters’ experiences but of first-time readers’ experiences.

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For analytic clarity, it may help to formulate frames using the word “because.” In this way, facts of the fiction can be distinguished from explanations which may or may not turn out to be adequate. Thus:

“Elton contrives to ride alone with Emma because he wants to continue talking about Harriet” (Emma’s frame: Elton Loves Harriet)

“Elton contrives to ride alone with Emma because he believes she is expecting his declaration of love and will reciprocate” (Elton’s frame: Emma Loves Elton)

“Elton contrives to ride alone with Emma because Austen wants to heighten the drama of his confession” (rereader’s frame: vicarious crafting)

This formula works well for Emma, where the plot twists do not fully overturn the facts (Elton really did want to own Emma’s portrait of Harriet; Frank really was flirting with Emma) but only the addition of new facts and/or new information about characters’ real motives.

As a matter of scholarly method, I propose limiting what can follow this “because” only to materials that can be pointed to within the novel itself. In other words, a first-time reader who resolves the question of what is going here with an answer such as “because every other Austen novel I’ve read does this” or “because romcom conventions require it” or “because she reminds me of my sister who always acts this way” would be stepping outside the bounds of literary frame analysis. As I define it, the frame must be attached to the picture: appealing to a frame that happens to be lying nearby might be illuminating but isn’t discussing this novel’s framing.

Of course, readers can generate inferences about a novel in all kinds of ways. Framing can be considered the subset of all inference-generating mechanisms where a reader’s inference can be traced to specific portions of the text—typically not far from the point where the question

68 See Ch.2 for an explanation of how what I call “vicarious crafting” can replace a novel’s misdirecting frames when rereading.
“what is going on here?” is raised. This creates some helpful conditions of falsifiability for matters of framing, which might initially seem quite subjective or variable: if it can’t be pointed to in the text it’s not one of the novel’s frames.

This restriction to the text itself has a further specific advantage when it comes to explaining the workings of a plot twist, and the difference between first-time readers and rereaders. A first-time reader (if we assume a linear reading) only has access to frames preceding the point where we ask what’s going on, and while a frame that immediately follows in the text may resolve the question smoothly, a frame that won’t appear in the text for hundreds of pages can’t be claimed as shaping a first-time reader’s experience of that moment. Thus, for example, Jane-and-Frank-engaged proves to be an exceptionally clarifying frame at the end of the novel, but is first offered as a frame long after many questions of what’s going on have been answered in other ways. While it’s tempting with any plot twist to look back and think that you should have known because all the clues were there on the page, until you’re given the right frame the relevant information is simply not usable. What you can know at any given time is both enabled and constrained by the frames available.

While frame analysis could equally be applied to rereading experiences, it is especially valuable for my purposes as a method for making well-grounded claims about first-time reading

69 Frames do not necessarily have to be located before the point in the text under consideration. As Goffman notes “there are occasions when we must wait until things are almost over before discovering what has been occurring and occasions of our own activity when we can considerably put off deciding what to claim we have been doing.” (Goffman, p. 2.) This will be particularly important for my later analysis of paragraph- and chapter-final frames.
experiences. In particular, this method treats with seriousness readers’ activities which ultimately prove misguided.

The concept of frame fills a gap in the spectrum of literary-theoretical accounts of meaning-making, or to put it in more ordinary terms how readers decide “what’s going on” in relation to a work of literature.

At one end of the spectrum, there are well-established theories and methods oriented towards making sense of individual words, phrases and sentences. Methods of “close reading” and theories of interpretation pay careful attention to the words before a reader’s eyes, digging into subtleties and ambiguities of word choice, syntax and implicature. Historically, these approaches derive from Christian and Jewish hermeneutics, where the sacredness of the text amply justified painstaking line-by-line analysis and commentary. It can feel miraculous to discover that a double meaning of a word transforms an apparently simple sentence into a richly complex one, or to experience how incomprehensibly contorted syntax gradually unfurls in your mind into a compelling statement that couldn’t be expressed any other way. In such cases, the question “what’s going on?” rewards fine-grained textual scrutiny.

At the other end of the spectrum, genre is another way to explain how readers make sense of what’s going on in a work. Familiarity with the detective genre might help you understand activities such as interrogating suspects, tracking footprints and studying cigarette ash, without the individual work having to spell out each time that the goal is solving a crime. Familiarity with the romcom genre helps audiences infer – whether reading Pride & Prejudice or watching Bringing Up Baby or Bridesmaids – that resentment between a man and a woman is a prelude to romance. (In arthouse dramas, in contrast, what’s going on when a man and a woman resent each other may not be incipient romance but incipient existential crisis, as in Jean-Luc Godard’s Le
Mépris or Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s Chinesisches Roulette.) Genre is a category far larger than an individual work, and the cues it provides to audiences making sense of any given work will be of a quite general kind.

For capturing narrative inferences, neither close reading nor genre is really adequate. Close reading is too fine a tool, a scalpel that dissects so finely that the material is no longer recognizable to the human eye. Genre knowledge is too blunt a tool, threatening to obliterate the specificities of a specific work as it stamps down with its template.

The frame is a medium-scale concept, situated between these two extremes, though as I deploy it closer to the close-reading end of the spectrum. As I use the term in this chapter, frames are internal to the novel – they refer to specific characters, relationships and events within the novel, rather than being abstracted topoi. For example, Jane-loves-Dixon is an important misdirecting frame within Emma – something Emma herself conjectures, and which readers are then repeatedly invited to use in making sense of Jane’s reserved behavior. While Jane-loves-Dixon could be fitted into a topos such as “unrequited love,” or more specifically “unrequited love between a single woman and a married man,” its misdirecting function within the novel doesn’t appeal to these higher levels of abstraction but instead generates inferences and expectations specifically and exclusively about Jane Fairfax.70

An objection might be raised against importing into literary study sociological concepts aimed at elucidating the experience of everyday life. In response, I’ll first stress again that my goal is not to diagnose characters’ experiences in terms of sociological categories: characters are

fictional constructs, and don’t necessarily correspond to actual human psychology. Instead, since Goffman’s conception of framing aims precisely to explain how people experience and make sense of a world where the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurry – a world of plays, pranks, long cons, pastiches, jokes, etc. – it’s well positioned to account for how real readers make sense of a novel which itself contains multiple layers of fact and fiction. More broadly, since by my definition a plot twist must be a surprise for readers, we need concepts that can meet us where we are, with at least one foot outside the world of the novel.

Secondly, sociological thinking is especially suitable for developing a richer understanding of first-time reading. First-time reading is inevitably and sometimes embarrassingly embedded in everyday life. As Nabokov suggested, first readings are distracted, interrupted, laborious. In contrast, scholarly (re-)reading, and even more so the way we recount it in scholarly writing, is as far removed from daily life as possible. Think of the image of a scholar alone with a book, in an office or library, immersed and undisturbed. Or think of the reading experience implicit in a close reading: perfect memory, intellectual agility, virtuosic perception of surprising interconnections. With these elevated models of reading in mind, the intrusion of sociology may feel like an insult. For first-time readers, on the other hand, sociology may reassure them that their everyday, imperfect reading is valid, interesting and even, in its own way, intellectually rigorous.

1.2 Misdirecting Frames in *Emma*

I now turn to *Emma*. In this chapter I’ll focus only on the Frank-and-Jane-engaged twist, both because it’s the most substantially developed twist of the three (the Harriet-Elton plot is over before the end of Vol.1, while the Emma-Knightley plot ticks away in the background until
the last few chapters) and because it mobilizes the full spectrum of Goffman’s fabrications and misframings.

1.2.1 Many Frames, Many Misdirections, One Secret

Although the Frank-Jane plot involves only one basic secret – their concealed engagement to each other – the novel offers many frames to misdirect readers from clues pointing to this secret. The novel not only offers two primary misdirecting frames concerning Frank and Jane individually, but also deploys a range of secondary and ad hoc frames to misdirect readers at specific moments. I argue that this multiplicity of frames, working in ever-changing combinations, contributes substantially to the effectiveness of the novel’s misdirections.

Both Jane and Frank are among the last characters to whom readers are introduced, and each is introduced with an initial frame that misdirects first-time readers about the place they’ll hold within the narrative. Jane’s name appears almost incidentally as Emma expresses annoyance with how much the foolish chatterbox Miss Bates (who happens to be Jane’s aunt) “bore[s] people”:

One is sick of the very name of Jane Fairfax. Every letter from her is read forty times over; her compliments to all friends go round and round again; and if she does but send her aunt the pattern of a stomacher, or knit a pair of garters for her grandmother, one hears of nothing else for a month.71

Jane Fairfax initially seems like one of the trivial topics that fill up many pages of the novel due to Miss Bates’s monologues. Moreover, from Emma’s perspective, the attention Jane receives is disproportionate to the interest of her life. Mingled with Emma’s well-established

71 Austen, pp. 56-7.
annoyance at Miss Bates, the novel initially frames Jane as significant only insofar as she evokes Emma’s resentment.

The frame is reinforced on Jane’s next mention, when Emma, having been caught up in a dull conversation with her brother-in-law, manages to shift her attention back to her sister, who is asking after Jane, “and Jane Fairfax, though no great favourite with [Emma] in general, she was at that moment very happy to assist in praising.”\(^{72}\) At this stage, readers might wonder whether Jane Fairfax will remain an off-screen presence, a somewhat annoying topic of conversation, only welcomed by Emma when conversation is really dragging.

Once Jane’s visit to the village is announced, Emma’s reflections further develop our understanding of her “dislike.” Emma is turned off by Jane’s “coldness and reserve,” but her most substantial objection is that “because their ages were the same, every body had supposed they must be so fond of each other.”\(^{73}\) The narrator notes that

\[
\text{It was a dislike so little just — every imputed fault was so magnified by fancy, that she never saw Jane Fairfax the first time after any considerable absence, without feeling that she had injured her.}\]

Beyond simply telling readers about Emma’s feelings towards another character, these words attach some new narrative expectations to an established frame. Insofar as Jane Fairfax will matter to this novel, readers may infer, her vexed relationship to Emma will be the primary point of tension. Perhaps Emma will gradually come to a more “just” appreciation of Jane when they’re in each other’s presence; perhaps Emma’s “fancy” will find new “faults” to “magnify”

\(^{72}\) Austen, p. 68.

\(^{73}\) Austen, p. 107.

\(^{74}\) Austen, p. 107.
(by Vol.2 Ch.2 we’ve already seen how disastrous Emma’s “fancy” was in matchmaking Harriet and Mr Elton). And let’s not forget this novel is called *Emma* – everything in Jane’s introduction suggests that Emma disliking her will determine her role in the narrative. Thus we have a strong framing for all subsequent events involving Jane: Emma-dislikes-Jane.

Readers similarly first encounter Frank Churchill framed as significant primarily in relation to Emma. Frank’s first visit to Highbury prompts thoughts of marriage in Emma that she’s apparently been brooding over for a long time:

> in spite of Emma’s resolution of never marrying, there was something in the name, in the idea of Mr. Frank Churchill, which always interested her. She had frequently thought […] that if she *were* to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition.\(^{75}\)

Will she or won’t she marry Frank? First-time readers are given clear narrative expectations, even if the outcome is still uncertain: Emma-may-marry-Frank. Not only does Emma herself speculate about this match, but others around her also seem to expect the match even before Frank and Emma meet.

> She could not but suppose it to be a match that every body who knew them must think of. That Mr. and Mrs. Weston did think of it, she was very strongly persuaded.\(^{76}\)

Emma’s initial feelings towards Jane and Frank mirror each other: both are long absent from Highbury, and in their absence the community’s assumptions of closeness between Emma and each of them prompts Emma’s resentment in the first case, self-satisfaction in the second.

\(^{75}\) Austen, p. 77.

\(^{76}\) Austen, p. 77.
These two frames – Emma-dislikes-Jane and Emma-may-marry-Frank – will continue to misdirect throughout the rest of the novel. The same chapter that first explains Emma’s dislike ends by confirming a hint that attentive readers may already have picked up on: that both Frank and Jane had been at the seaside town of Weymouth, and in fact spent time together. I quote the end of the chapter more or less in full:

The like reserve prevailed on other topics. She and Mr. Frank Churchill had been at Weymouth at the same time. It was known that they were a little acquainted; but not a syllable of real information could Emma procure as to what he truly was. “Was he handsome?” – “She believed he was reckoned a very fine young man.” “Was he agreeable?” – “He was generally thought so.” “Did he appear a sensible young man; a young man of information?” – “[…] She believed every body found his manners pleasing.” Emma could not forgive her.

Chapter III

Emma could not forgive her;

Framed in other ways, Jane’s “reserve” might lead first-time readers to infer that she has something to hide specifically about Frank, indeed that she thinks he’s more “handsome” and “agreeable” than she can let on. But the comedy and interpersonal friction generated between Emma’s quizzing and Jane’s refusing to give “real information” suggests the troubled relationship between the two women is what matters. The final sentence, and its repetition at the start of the following chapter, reinforces the Emma-dislikes-Jane frame. Indeed, what presumably makes Jane’s reserve so “unforgivable” is that Emma believes the topic of Frank Churchill to be mere small talk that Jane could discuss freely. D. A. Miller has discussed this moment of verbatim repetition across a chapter break as registering a shift from free indirect discourse in the first instance to a “fact of the fiction” in the second. The novel doubles down


78 D. A. Miller, pp. 63–65.
on Emma-dislikes-Jane as a “fact,” just at the moment when a direct connection has been revealed between Jane and Frank. The clue can hide in plain sight because it is immediately preceded and followed by a well-established misdirecting frame.

This moment in fact depends on more than just one misdirecting frame. Besides the Emma-dislikes-Jane frame, the previous few pages have introduced another Jane-related frame that will run through most of the novel: Jane-loves-Dixon. In the previous chapter, details from the letter announcing Jane’s sojourn in Highbury inspire in Emma “an ingenious and animating suspicion […] with regard to Jane Fairfax, this charming Mr. Dixon, and the not going to Ireland,”79 namely that there is unrequited love between Jane and Mr Dixon, newly married to Jane’s best friend. This secret, forbidden love affair seems initially like it might dispell Emma’s resentment towards Jane: when the two are reunited face-to-face, Emma reflects that “it seemed impossible to feel anything but compassion and respect” for Jane, “especially, if to every well-known particular entitling her to interest, were added the highly probable circumstance of an attachment to Mr. Dixon.”80 Benevolently, Emma immediately slips into some bad old habits, “wish[ing] to scheme […] for her” about eligible bachelors.81

Against this background, while the chapter ends with Emma questioning Jane about Frank, Emma’s most intense frustrations arise a page earlier when she questions Jane about Mr Dixon:

79 Austen, p. 102.
80 Austen, p. 107.
81 Austen, p. 108.
she was more reserved on the subject of Weymouth and the Dixons than any thing. She seemed bent on giving no real insight into Mr. Dixon’s character, or her own value for his company. At this point, Emma (in free indirect discourse) calls Jane “disgustingly, […] suspiciously reserved.” Emma’s questions about Frank are only an afterthought – a test to see if Jane’s reserve holds even for people who shouldn’t matter to her in the slightest. Thus she takes Jane’s withholding of “insight into Mr. Dixon’s character” as reflecting a secret about their specific relationship, whereas Jane’s reserve about Frank just reflects her obstinacy. With the benefit of hindsight, rereaders can see that the reverse was true, but the frames misdirect first-time readers by both playing up Dixon’s significance and playing down Frank’s.

In the novel’s first meeting between Emma and Jane, these two distinct frames work in concert to misdirect readers about clues hiding in plain sight. Throughout the novel, there is not a one-to-one relationship between a given secret and the misdirecting frames used to distract from it. If there were, it might simply be too obvious, too easy for readers to discover: readers might start to notice a pattern of the same frame being evoked every time an apparently trivial detail was mentioned. Instead, numerous distinct frames serve to misdirect readers from the Jane-Frank secret – sometimes in combination, as here, sometimes separately. Besides the Emma-dislikes-Jane and Jane-loves-Dixon frames, other recurring frames include Frank-looks-down-on-Jane (to misdirect from signs that he loves her), Miss-Bates-chatters-mindlessly (numerous revealing details are mentioned in passing in longer rambling monologues of hers about carriages, apples and eyeglass repairs) and Knightley-loves-Jane (introduced speculatively by Mrs Weston, and briefly entertained by Emma).

82 Austen, p. 108.
All these frames I’ve discussed so far originate diegetically. Some come from Emma, others are deliberate deceptions by another character (Frank pretends to look down on Jane), some are innocent misunderstandings by a character (Mrs Weston sincerely wonders whether Knightley’s attentions to Jane betray affection) and others still can’t be traced back to one character but arise within the local community (e.g. widespread hopes of a match between Emma and Frank). In sum: many frames, many varied ways to misdirect from a single secret plot point.

These diegetic frames are a convenient excuse for the novelist – she can rely on Frank to misdirect Emma at every turn without herself being accused of deception or contrivance. When the situation doesn’t involve a character deliberately deceiving Emma the situation is a little murkier. While a frame might be introduced by an unwitting character or community, it is a novelistic contrivance to have a misdirecting frame appear just at the very moment when it’s needed to misdirect the reader.

Perhaps as pre-emptive defence against accusations of deception, early in Vol.3 Austen explicitly introduces what will ultimately prove to be the correct frame for this entire chain of events. It’s an exceptional moment where the narrative, otherwise consistently focalized through Emma, temporarily takes on Knightley’s perspective. The novel turns to his perspective at precisely a moment when he begins to develop a new frame for understanding Jane and Frank’s interactions which nobody else in the community shares:

while so many were devoting [Frank] to Emma, and Emma herself making him over to Harriet, Mr. Knightley began to suspect him of some inclination to trifle with Jane Fairfax. He could not understand it; but there were symptoms of intelligence between them – he thought so at least – symptoms of admiration on his side, which,
having once observed, he could not persuade himself to think entirely void of meaning.\textsuperscript{83}

Knightley correctly begins to perceive “admiration” between Frank and Jane, and readers are invited to consider how events look different with this framing.

But the novel doesn’t yet invite readers to definitively accept this new way of understanding, instead introducing this frame speculatively, raising it as a possibility only to defuse its enormous implications (for now). The novel swiftly counters this new frame with two well-established ones: Knightley-dislikes-Frank has been demonstrated numerous times already, with Knightley calling Frank insincere and feckless even before he arrived in the village. In addition, this episode focalized through Knightley begins by evoking this frame, reminding readers that Knightley “had certainly taken an early dislike to Frank Churchill” and is now “only growing to dislike him more.”\textsuperscript{84} As he begins to observe signs of Frank and Jane’s secret understanding, he inwardly describes Frank as “This gallant young man, who seemed to love without feeling, and to recommend himself without complaisance.”\textsuperscript{85} Readers may speculate that Knightley’s dislike is coloring his perceptions just as Emma’s feelings have done many times before.

In addition, when Knightley shortly after this scene raises his suspicions with Emma, she evokes another well-established frame to further counter the drastic reorientation that Knightley is suggesting. As mentioned above, the Frank-looks-down-on-Jane frame is established almost as soon as he arrives in the village, and is one of his favorite shared jokes with Emma. Rather than

\textsuperscript{83} Austen, p. 224.

\textsuperscript{84} Austen, p. 224.

\textsuperscript{85} Austen, p. 228.
experiencing any shock or denial, Emma has this frame ready to hand when Knightley presents his suspicions. She declares herself “amuse[d]” by Knightley’s “imagination wander[ing].” Without totally explaining the (rather cruel) in-joke she’s shared with Frank she assures Knightley that the alphabet messages Frank sent to Jane reflected “feelings […] of a totally different nature” and that there was “a good deal of nonsense in it.” (She knows about the teasing word “Dixon” that Frank sent to Jane, but didn’t see the sincere word “blunder.”) Emphatically declaring that she’s certain of Frank’s “indifference” to Jane, Emma “silence[s]” Knightley with her “confidence.”86 The chapter ends a few sentences later, and readers may be left thinking that this episode will be significant as another example of Frank teasing Jane, and an amusing reversal in which Emma can chastise Knightley for letting his matchmaking imagination run away with him.

Thus the episode is not dismissed as meaningless – which might start to arouse suspicions about why it was included in the novel at all – but instead is presented as important in relation to frames quite different from the one Knightley has hit on, and which will eventually constitute the novel’s central plot twist. The novel offers so many misdirecting frames, that one new (genuine) frame doesn’t immediately stand out as definitive. Knightley’s inchoate sense of what’s going on between Frank and Jane is not yet presented to readers as the most credible explanation.

The Frank-Jane twist and its misdirections are my focus in this chapter, but the many misdirecting frames are not solely deployed to misdirect from the Frank-Jane plot but also from

86 Austen, p. 229.
other twists. Knightley-dislikes-Frank, for example, also serves to misdirect readers from his love for Emma, framing his jealousy in terms of moral probity.

Similarly, the Emma-may-marry-Frank frame suggests to readers that if Emma is to have a marriage plot it will concern Frank Churchill, and not Knightley. After all, despite Emma’s “resolution […] of never marrying,” which she repeatedly reminds herself and readers of, she concedes that “if she were to marry, [Frank] was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition.”\(^87\) Emma-dislikes-Jane also helps misdirect from Emma’s love for Knightley: when Mrs Weston speculates that Knightley may be romantically interested in Jane, Emma’s horror (besides the not very convincing concern about her nephew “Little Henry” not inheriting Knightley’s estate) is in part because Emma can “not at all endure the idea of Jane Fairfax at Donwell Abbey.”\(^88\)

I take *Emma* to be a successful, sophisticated example of misdirection and plot twist, and the complex interlocking of many different misdirecting frames is an important aspect of its craft. Like the disorienting hall of mirrors at the climax of *The Lady from Shanghai*, multiplying the number of frames makes it increasingly hard to spot the one real thing within a crowd of illusions.

### 1.2.2 Placement of Frames: Beginnings, Middles and Ends of Paragraphs and Chapters

Many of *Emma*’s misdirecting frames arise diegetically, whether through deliberate deception (especially by Frank), self-delusion (by Emma, first and foremost) or honest misunderstanding (by foolish characters such as Miss Bates, Harriet Smith and Mrs Elton). And

\(^{87}\) Austen, p. 77.

\(^{88}\) Austen, p. 148.
because of the consistent focalization through Emma – because readers’ access to the novel’s world is mediated through her – almost all our misunderstandings correspond to some misunderstanding of Emma’s.

But this doesn’t mean that readers’ misunderstandings are coextensive with Emma’s, nor that we’re misdirected in the same way as Emma is. This section explores one resource for misdirection which is extra-diegetic: namely, *where* frames are positioned at the level of paragraphs and chapters. Put simply, misdirecting frames tend to be positioned at the beginnings and ends of paragraphs and chapters, not in middles. And in general beginnings and ends of paragraphs and chapters stand out as significant, while middles are more capacious stretches of text where readers aren’t cued to scrutinize every word. By evoking misdirecting frames at the beginnings and ends of textual units, and dropping hints at the twist in passing in the middle, Austen enhances the efficacy of the frames while allowing the clues to hide in plain sight. While on closer examination this is a consistent pattern, for a first-time reader who doesn’t know where to look or what will prove true or false, the interpretive salience of beginnings and endings are likely to shape their responses only subconsciously.

Earlier I noted that “Emma could not forgive her,” which closes one chapter and begins the next reinforces the misdirecting Emma-dislikes-Jane frame through repetition, and the way it shifts from free indirect discourse to narrative fact. But the chapter position itself also reinforces the misdirection: at the close of Vol.2 Ch.2, it serves as a kind of summary, suggesting that what’s gone in this chapter has been another episode in the annals of Emma-dislikes-Jane. Correspondingly, the opening paragraph of the next chapter shifts from Emma’s dislike into the
The irony of Knightley taking “great pleasure” in Emma’s feigned friendliness to Jane. Any thoughts connecting Jane and Frank are lost in the transition.

*Emma*’s chapter beginnings and endings, and on a smaller scale paragraph beginnings and endings, lend themselves to narratorial generalization, reflection and anticipation. In these opening and closing moments, the spatial aspect of the metaphor of framing is unusually literal, since these sentences surround, and thus offer to make sense of, the larger chunks of text in between. Importantly, generalizations at the beginnings and endings of chapters and paragraphs typically do *not* misdirect – if they did, readers might catch on and start to distrust them. On the contrary, the misdirections I examine in this chapter must be understood against the backdrop of this novel most often validating the frames and inferences that beginnings and endings offer. Readers grow accustomed to paragraph and chapter beginnings and endings being helpful places at which to establish what is, or has just been, going on. For example, the novel’s first chapter ends with Knightley laughingly advising Emma to

“[…] help [Mr Elton] to the best of the fish and the chicken, but leave him to chuse his own wife. Depend upon it, a man of six or seven-and-twenty can take care of himself.”

By the end of Volume 1, readers will have seen this disagreement about matchmaking play out, and Knightley vindicated. Chapter 3 ends with Harriet’s gratitude after first meeting Emma:

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90 Austen, p. 7.
the humble, grateful, little girl went off with highly gratified feelings, delighted with the affability with which Miss Woodhouse had treated her all the evening, and actually shaken hands with her at last!  

Their friendship, despite its ups and downs, continues to be characterized by Harriet’s excessive deference to Emma. The first few chapters, then, establish the chapter boundaries as reliable places for narrative summary and prediction, inviting readers to generate inferences and expectations about what’s going on which are confirmed before too long.

As such, when the opening paragraph of Vol.1 Ch.6 states that Emma “was quite convinced of Mr. Elton’s being in the fairest way of falling in love [with Harriet], if not in love already,” first-time readers might notice the slide into free indirect discourse introduce by “convinced of,” but they might also be aware of a new chapter starting, and trust in the authoritative statements so far encountered in this position. And by the time readers learn that this statement is pure fantasy on Emma’s part, the chances of them remembering this exact statement and its textual position are vanishingly unlikely. You don’t notice the frame, but what you see through it.

Throughout Vols.2 and 3, once the Harriet-Elton plot wraps up and Frank and Jane arrive in the village, chapter openings and endings repeatedly frame events to misdirect readers from their secret engagement. Vol.2 Ch.5 ends with Emma “very well pleased with this beginning of the acquaintance” with Frank, and the following chapter opens with “The next morning brought Mr. Frank Churchill again.” In other words, Emma-may-marry-Frank x2. In the rest of the

93 Austen, p. 126.
opening paragraph, the narrator explains further that when invited to choose the direction of his walk with Mrs Weston, Frank “immediately fixed on Highbury,” which in Mrs Weston’s mind “stood for Hartfield; and she trusted to its bearing the same construction with him.”\textsuperscript{94} The insinuation, filtered through Mrs Weston’s perceptions, is that Frank’s choice of walk is really a choice to visit Emma again. Complementary to the Emma-may-marry-Frank frame, which is established long before Frank arrives in the village, here we have the first instance of the frequent Frank-desires-Emma misdirecting frame.

From then on, misdirecting frames proliferate at chapter boundaries. The chapter just discussed ends by evoking the Frank-desires-Emma frame again, with Emma suspecting in Frank an “inclination to settle early in life, and to marry,” and Ch.7 revives the corresponding Emma-may-marry-Frank frame in recounting how “Emma’s very good opinion of Frank Churchill was a little shaken the following day, by hearing that he was gone off to London, merely to have his hair cut.”\textsuperscript{95} Ch.8 begins “Frank Churchill came back again.”\textsuperscript{96} And so on… In sum, chapter beginnings and endings frame the content between them not only temporally but also interpretively – often reliably, and less often – though still repeatedly – to misdirect.

I turn now to the smaller scale of the paragraph, through a detailed analysis of paragraph-level framing in Vol.2 Ch.8. This is the first chapter where Emma, Jane and Frank are all gathered in the same room together, and is thus a chapter that drops a number of hints about Jane and Frank’s engagement, and correspondingly misdirects readers more frequently. The chapter

\textsuperscript{94} Austen, pp. 126-127.

\textsuperscript{95} Austen, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{96} Austen, p. 137.
not only opens with the Frank-desires-Emma misdirecting frame quoted above but closes with another use of it:

“Perhaps it is as well,” said Frank Churchill, as he attended Emma to her carriage. “I must have asked Miss Fairfax, and her languid dancing would not have agreed with me, after yours.”

Quoting the passage out of context can only imperfectly do justice to its effect. These two sentences constitute the entire final paragraph, which is visibly shorter than the five paragraphs preceding it. It’s followed by empty space, and then the heading for the next chapter. The amount of space given to this apparently trivial bit of flirtatious gossip puts significant interpretive weight on it. Since the content of Frank’s words themselves aren’t of much substance, readers may well turn to the interpersonal significance of his statement, and here they have two frames readily available: Frank-looks-down-on-Jane and Frank-desires-Emma, already repeatedly activated earlier in the chapter (as I’ll discuss below), here offer a very plausible interpretive frame: what is going on here, these frames allow first-time readers to answer, is that Frank is gently mocking Jane in order to discreetly express admiration for Emma.

The novel doesn’t share with us Emma’s reaction here, but readers can infer that she feels (as she explicitly feels at other points) not only flattered by Frank’s compliment but elevated by the position of ironic superiority he puts her in. Frank doesn’t need to say how good Emma’s dancing is, because she’s intelligent enough to infer it. This position of (self-perceived) ironic knowingness finds a parallel in readers at the end of this chapter. The novel doesn’t need to spell 

97 Austen, p. 149.

98 “A deflection […] is […] seen much more easily when the lines are excerpted from the ongoing narrative in a critical essay than when they are encountered in the flow of regular narration.” (Jenny Davidson, ‘Jane Austen and the Conditions of Knowledge,’ in A Companion to British Literature, ed. by Robert DeMaria, Heesok Chang, and Samantha Zacher (Hoboken: Wiley, 2014), III, 298–311 (p. 306).)
out the implications of Frank’s words because we’re intelligent enough to figure them out – or so we’re led to believe.\textsuperscript{99} For all Jane Austen’s much vaunted subtlety, the chapter endings in \textit{Emma} actually deploy irony in rather obvious ways. Or to be more precise, the first layer of irony is quite obvious, but conceals further layers of irony. First-time readers need to put in some inferential work to make sense of what’s going on, and may thus feel a sense of interpretive superiority which serves to misdirect them. A sense of irresolution or mystery might prompt readers to ask difficult questions and pull at threads, whereas an irony resolved by readily available frames gives closure and satisfaction.

Chapter beginnings and endings foreground irony, and irony reinforces the authoritative summaries of the situation that beginnings and endings tend to give. This also occurs with smaller scope at the level of paragraphs within a chapter. Misdirecting frames are positioned at the beginnings and endings of paragraphs, while potential hints at the twist are scattered in passing in between. The party scene in Vol.2 Ch.8 offers us numerous examples. Before Jane arrives, Emma conspiratorially shares with Frank her theory that the Jane-loves-Dixon frame can explain the mysterious pianoforté Jane just received as a gift. Frank, for his part, plays along with this convenient cover story – “Your reasonings carry my judgment along with them entirely”\textsuperscript{100} – lending the frame additional solidity.

\textsuperscript{99} On readers’ feeling of closeness to Austen’s ironic narrators, see Auyoung, \textit{When Fiction Feels Real}, 53-60. Auyoung notes that “Austen’s indirect style […] does not actually prevent readers from comprehending her,” (Auyoung, p. 59.) and argues that the “sustained experience of reading between the lines intensifies the reader’s consciousness of being uniquely able to comprehend the implied author.” (Auyoung, p. 55.)

\textsuperscript{100} Austen, p. 141.
Thus, once Jane arrives, the Jane-loves-Dixon frame misdirects Emma, and potentially first-time readers, in relation to details that also hint at Frank and Jane’s secret engagement. A paragraph in which Emma observes Jane across the room concludes with Emma seeing

the blush of consciousness with which congratulations [about the pianoforté] were received, the blush of guilt which accompanied the name of “my excellent friend Col. Campbell.”

The end of the paragraph here encourages readers to linger briefly on what Emma thinks but doesn’t need to say: that Jane “blushes” because she’s “conscious” of the gift signifying a secret love affair, and feels “guilt” because she’s deceiving people in attributing the gift to Col. Campbell. Phrased in this way, Emma is in fact right on the mark, her only mistake is to think the secret lover is Dixon. A first-time reader who has the Jane-loves-Dixon frame but no Frank-and-Jane-engaged frame can really only understand the irony here in the way Emma does. (I note in passing how many different frames are deployed to misdirect in this scene which drops an unusually large number of clues.)

Two paragraphs later, “some of the gentlemen” re-enter the room, “and the very first of the early was Frank Churchill,” eager, first-time readers can infer with the aid of the Frank-desires-Emma frame, to be reunited with Emma. The paragraph almost immediately doubles down on the Frank-desires-Emma frame, but not before placing a small clue mid-paragraph:

101 Austen, p. 142.

102 This is one of many situations across all of Austen’s novels of accidentally-accurate knowledge that resemble what philosophers call a Gettier scenario. While Scott M. DeVries (‘Borges Scoops Gettier,’ Philosophy and Literature, 41.1A (2017), 288–302) has claimed that Borges “scooped” Gettier, my findings suggest that Austen scooped both of them by a full century.

103 Austen, p. 142.
after paying his compliments en passant to Miss Bates and her niece, [Frank] made his way directly to the opposite side of the circle, where sat Miss Woodhouse; and till he could find a seat by her, would not sit at all. Emma divined what every body present must be thinking. She was his object, and every body must perceive it.\textsuperscript{104} Jane isn’t even named here, merely evoked as Miss Bates’s “niece,” so that readers may gloss over – as Emma does – the fact that in a paragraph that uses the word “first” twice in its opening sentences, Frank actually addresses Jane \textit{first} of all. First-time readers have no frame to connect Frank and Jane romantically, but do have a repeatedly evoked Frank-desires-Emma frame that for the most part makes sense of what’s going on here. Even first-time readers who suspect that Emma’s own self-centredness is coloring the free indirect discourse towards the end of this passage have no frame through which to perceive “en passant” as the most misdirecting free indirect discourse in this passage: these are Emma’s perceptions – for Frank, talking with Jane is not a passing act of politeness but the main event.

If “en passant” registers at all, Frank-looks-down-on-Jane is ready to explain it, and Frank himself will soon deceptively evoke this frame. At around its midpoint, the chapter does prominently use paragraph-initial and paragraph-final positions to foreground a hint of a serious relationship between Frank and Jane:

\begin{quote}
she saw Frank Churchill looking intently across the room at Miss Fairfax, who was sitting exactly opposite.
“What is the matter?” said she.
He started.\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

If the third paragraph ended here, we’d have a hint that might make even a first-time reader suspicious. Instead, the paragraph continues on with Frank evoking the Frank-looks-
down-on-Jane frame to cover up what rereaders can infer was a loving gaze: he calls his staring “very rude,” and explains to Emma that he’s struck by Jane’s hairstyle being “very odd” and “outrée,” before reviving the Jane-loves-Dixon frame by proposing to ask Jane “whether it is an Irish fashion” (Mr and Mrs Dixon having gone to Ireland) and, as the paragraph ends, inviting Emma to observe “whether she colours.”

Frank walks away, and the middle of the next paragraph slips in further hints when it notes, with frustration focalized through Emma, that as Frank “had improvidently placed himself […] exactly in front of Miss Fairfax,” Emma “could absolutely distinguish nothing.” Like “en passant,” “improvidently” is free indirect narration (focalized through Emma) presented as fact. It may raise a smile in rereaders, who imagine Emma’s frustration at what she perceives to be an accident but is in fact a carefully composed mise-en-scène. For first-time readers, however, the middle of a paragraph is not a place to linger, and the paragraph ends by stressing that Emma sees “nothing,” with the tantalizing implication that Jane’s face, if seen, might confirm Emma’s Jane-loves-Dixon frame.

Emma is buttonholed by other guests, and can’t focus on Frank or Jane again for a while. Even during this time talking to others, however, more misdirecting frames are evoked. Mrs Weston shares with Emma her discovery that Jane and Miss Bates were brought to the party in Mr Knightley’s carriage: a “very kind” and “thoughtful” gesture, especially as Knightley wouldn’t have used the carriage for himself but “only as an excuse for assisting them.”

106 Austen, p. 144.
107 Austen, p. 144.
108 Austen, p. 145.
leads Mrs Weston to share a speculative frame of “a match between Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax,” 109 which Emma calls ridiculous but will cautiously, anxiously entertain for the following six chapters until Knightley explicitly denies the Jane-and-Knightley-match frame in Vol.2 Ch.15. 110 Even when Jane and Frank are offscreen during this party, new misdirecting frames are being introduced to position each of them in relation to other characters and not each other.

After four pages of back and forth between Emma and Mrs Weston about Jane and Knightley, the host Mr Cole asks Emma to sing, and

Frank Churchill, of whom, in the eagerness of her conversation with Mrs. Weston, [Emma] had been seeing nothing, except that he had found a seat by Miss Fairfax, followed Mr. Cole, to add his very pressing entreaties; and as, in every respect, it suited Emma best to lead, she gave a very proper compliance. [end of paragraph] 111

While a forewarned reader might linger on Emma’s obscured vision and the repeated proximity of Frank to a woman he claims to look down on, the paragraph ends by evoking the Emma-may-marry-Frank frame (“very pressing entreaties,” “very proper compliance”). What’s going on here seems to be two prospective lovers – Frank and Emma – being separated by others and contriving to come together again under the pretext of music.

Emma begins to sing, and is taken “agreeably by surprize” when Frank joins to duet with her. After a few songs, Jane Fairfax takes over, and the paragraph ends with Emma noting that

109 Austen, p. 145.

110 And even then, Mrs Weston sows further seeds of doubt when – in the final paragraph of the chapter – she teasingly suggests that Knightley “is so very much occupied by the idea of not being in love with [Jane], that I should not wonder if it were to end in his being so at last.” (Austen, p. 188.)

111 Austen, p. 147.
Jane’s “performance, both vocal and instrumental, she never could attempt to conceal from herself, was infinitely superior to her own.” Emma dislikes Jane rears its ugly head, reinforced by the next paragraph which begins “With mixed feelings, she seated herself” – the mixture being presumably resentment of Jane and pleasure at having just sung with Frank. Frank, though, the narrative notes a little belatedly, has not sat down alongside Emma:

Frank Churchill sang again. They [Frank and Jane] had sung together once or twice, it appeared, at Weymouth. Tucked away in the middle of a long paragraph, and hedged with vagueness (“once or twice”) and uncertainty (“it appeared”), this sentence – insofar as it seems significant at all – seems mainly to evoke Emma’s indifference.

Yet even this quiet hint of a connection between Jane and Frank is immediately followed by another misdirecting frame: the newly-introduced Jane-and-Knightley-match frame. The very next sentence reads:

But the sight of Mr. Knightley among the most attentive, soon drew away half Emma’s mind; and she fell into a train of thinking on the subject of Mrs. Weston’s suspicions, to which the sweet sounds of the united voices gave only momentary interruptions.

The rest of the paragraph is given over to Emma reflecting on her “objections” to the match, and most of the remaining few pages give us Emma trying to sound Knightley’s feelings about Jane through questions and observations. While various schools of literary theory have advocated “reading against the grain” and the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a first-time reader

112 Austen, p. 147.
113 Austen, p. 147.
114 Austen, pp. 147-148.
who ignored the frames here concerning possible matches between Emma and Frank, and between Jane and Knightley, would not necessarily be a good reader. In fact, such a reader would be the opposite of a close reader because they would be failing to make the inferences that the text itself cues first-time readers to make. In short, we can’t understand this scene properly unless we first misunderstand it.

As noted above, the chapter’s final flourish is a revival of the Frank-desires-Emma frame, with Frank playfully complimenting Emma by contrasting Jane’s “languid dancing.” A lot has gone on at this party. All the misdirecting frames have offered readers a series of eventful and intriguing interactions, with various conflicts and desires – some concerning Emma directly, others concerning her only as busybody – moving a step forward. It’s been a busy time for Emma, and for readers too.

But while we might feel like we’ve shared in her experiences – perceived what she’s perceived, had our perception obscured just as she has – our experiences are not identical in important ways. Emma has gone through an evening, we have gone through a chapter. An evening is a unit of time, a chapter is a unit of text that we experience in time. This might seem like splitting hairs, but it’s important because the positioning of misdirecting frames at the start or end of paragraphs, even when diegetically grounded (e.g. Frank’s deliberate attempts to misdirect Emma), introduces a second level of temporality distinct from that of Emma’s experiences within the novel’s world.

\[115\] Austen, p. 149.
How do paragraphs shape the time of reading? I’m wary of categorical claims. Where one reader pauses, another may only slow down, a third reader may speed up and a fourth throws the book across the room. And we could also speculate that the content of specific sentences (whether they’re exciting, tedious, emotive) or other aspects of the form (sentence length or complexity) have the largest effect on reading time. Given how many paragraphs make up even a single novel, and how ubiquitous they are in almost all novels (with noteworthy exceptions like Thomas Bernhard’s *The Lime Works* (1970) – and we might ask what reading temporality that novel produces precisely because it’s paragraph-less), it might seem dubious to generalize about the effect of paragraphs on reading at all.

For now, I’ll limit my claims about paragraphs/chapters and reading time to *Emma* alone. For convenience, I’ll focus only on the endings of these textual units rather than beginnings or middles. From very early on, this novel invites readers to linger on paragraph-final and chapter-final sentences. It does this by giving these sentences unusual interpretive density – most commonly through irony – so that unlike with other sentences a reader will reliably be rewarded for spending a few extra moments reflecting on those sentences.¹¹⁶

From the third paragraph of the novel onwards, readers are offered numerous paragraph-final sentences where irony is immediately perceptible. A selection from the first chapter:

highly esteeming Miss Taylor’s judgment, but directed chiefly by her own.

(Irony: Emma’s “esteem” for her friend means very little for her actions.)

¹¹⁶ Examination of paragraphing and chapter breaks in early editions of *Emma* (for more nuanced observations on page layout) or in Austen’s few surviving manuscripts (for evidence of revisions reflecting sensitivity to paragraph position) could enrich this argument with more historically-grounded observations.
The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her.  

(Irony: overstatement – “so unperceived,” “not by any means.”)

“[…] What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her [Miss Taylor]!”

(Irony: a happy marriage is a cause for lament.)

In the novel’s first chapter alone, readers encounter a number of paragraph-final sentences whose irony is built into the syntax or made clear by the immediate context. It also offers several paragraph-final sentences where characters themselves point out the irony to each other, thus modelling ironic interpretation for readers: Knightley arrives with a “cheerful manner,” but Mr. Woodhouse worries that “[he] must have had a shocking walk.” Knightley immediately corrects him that, “It is a beautiful, moonlight night” and “so mild that I must draw back from your great fire.” Similarly, after Emma jokingly calls herself “fanciful and troublesome,” her father misunderstands and sadly accepts that “I am afraid I am sometimes very fanciful and troublesome.” Emma immediately responds to correct his misunderstanding: “My dearest papa! You do not think I could mean you […] I meant only myself.” I’ll refrain from giving examples from subsequent chapters, but the general point here is that the novel instills in readers a sense – which needn’t be conscious – that paragraphs often end on a note of irony, and that paragraph-final sentences thus often say more than is evident at first glance. The same is true, at a larger scale, of the endings of chapters. While this pattern can’t fully determine an

118 Austen, p. 3.
119 Austen, p. 4.
120 Austen, p. 5.
individual reader’s timings, it consistently cues readers – and rewards them – for spending more time and interpretive energy at these spots.

How do these paragraph- and chapter-level effects on reading time relate to the diegetic time of the novel? As the examples already given indicate, instances of irony and misdirection in these end positions cut across the distinction between dialogue and narration. This means that both utterances by characters, which take up specific lengths of diegetic time, and the narrator’s reports on events within the novel, which don’t take up time within the novel’s universe, are potentially places where interpretive time expands for readers. That this should function both within dialogue and narration is less jarring in Emma than in most novels, since its persistent and flexible free indirect discourse already blurs the absolute division between characters’ words and the narrator’s words.

The ironic pause is reinforced by a protagonist who is herself an ironist. At the end of many paragraphs, we could imagine Emma turning Fleabag-like to the camera and raising an eyebrow while time briefly pauses for the other characters around her. But this doesn’t happen. The Emma of this novel – though she may relish certain ironies she perceives – does not pause time or break the fourth wall. So while we may feel closely aligned with her in enjoying these ironies, and indeed perceive many of the ironies focalized through her, I want to emphasize that the ironies are delivered to readers by different means. It’s only by prising apart readers’ experiences from Emma’s that we can fully appreciate the craft Austen put into misdirecting us, chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph.

1.2.3 The Art of Frame-Making

The next section will focus on Emma’s revelation scenes, but I want to delay our transition to that more knowing phase of the novel a little longer. In fact, examining misdirecting
frames is valuable as a reading method because it moderates scholars’ usual drive towards knowingness, without conversely assuming a false pose of ignorance. As I noted at the opening of this chapter, once you know what the twist is it’s easy to fixate on the revelation and not the earlier misunderstandings that set you up for it. Yet artful misdirection is at least as important as the revelation for the effectiveness of a twist: it matters not just that readers are misdirected, but how. I have discussed the many-to-many relation of misdirecting frames to plot secrets and the positioning of frames and clues at paragraph and chapter level because they seem to me two of the most artful aspects of Austen’s technique in *Emma*.

These two specific techniques may or may not prove as crucial to other plot twists. There’s no inherent reason they should be, and in fact it seems more likely that techniques for making misdirecting frames effective develop and multiply over time (if every novel misdirected readers at paragraph boundaries, readers would quickly learn to see through it). What I do expect to be of general importance for plot twists is the way that misdirecting frames present what will prove to be clues to the twist not as insignificant details but as significant for other reasons (i.e. significant within another frame). Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the subject of Ch.4, is very different from *Emma* in many ways but similarly deploys frames to place strong but misdirecting emphasis on precisely those details that eventually prove to be clues to the novel’s twist.

The twist, when it’s revealed, erases the misplaced significance we attributed to those earlier details. (As we’ll see in the next section, that overwriting of earlier significance is in *Emma*’s case built into the novel itself.) It’s perfectly legitimate for ordinary readers to assent to this overwriting: they’ve experienced the novel’s misdirections, they don’t need to retain all the details after reading, as though preparing for an exam. But for scholars wanting to understand the
When I began working on this chapter my goal was to reconstruct and study first-time reading experiences. Misdirecting frames have now brought me to reflections on the writer. How a writer’s intentions should factor into our understanding of their writing is a murky issue, most notably being condemned as the Intentional Fallacy by Wimsatt and Beardsley. In part, the lineage of “impersonal” authors that encompasses Flaubert, Mallarmé, Joyce, T. S. Eliot and Beckett has made it appealing and prestigious to think of an author as “like the God of creation, remain[ing] within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.” These words come from Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and echo an 1857 letter by Flaubert: “the artist must be in his work like God in his creation: invisible and yet all-powerful: we should sense him everywhere, but not see him.” Austen is very often included in this lineage, a stylist even more refined and subtly ironic than Flaubert, skewering provincial pretensions with exquisite detachment. D. A. Miller compares Austen to “an impersonal deity,” though he eventually judges this to be more a pose than actual divine status.

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123 D. A. Miller, p. 56.
In focusing on misdirecting frames, I have begun to perceive a more down-to-earth side to Austen as a writer. This Austen is not a God of creation but a brilliant artisan, a highly accomplished crafter. This Austen seeks not to humiliate characters or readers, but herself to practice humility. Picture her in her workshop, sawing, planing, carving, sanding and varnishing her frames. All that work not to draw attention to itself, but to imperceptibly shape the picture seen through it. It’s work that can – and should – go unnoticed by the vast majority of the audience, but no less important for that reason. This may seem like a demotion from godlike status, but I think bringing Austen down closer to our level is important for understanding something the impersonality tradition has obscured: this novel is written for us, it needs readers, it’s nothing without you. Eric Griffiths has observed that Gerard Manley Hopkins’s elaborate stress marking (e.g. “ÁND” rather than “and”) “makes explicit the constant neediness of script.” Hopkins’s contrivances on the page reflect a need for this printed poetry to find an absent voice to animate it. In the same way, the frames I’ve been examining reach out needily towards readers. The main difference is that in order to effectively misdirect us, we must be unconscious of the fact that these frames are there for our benefit.

1.3 The Pleasures of Surprise: Thinking Back and Laughing

We’ve spent enough time on the setup, now for the reveal.

This section turns to the novel’s end, when all the misdirecting frames are broken, and new frames are placed before readers instead. The payoff comes in the form of surprise, but it is

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124 For an account of the *ars est celare artem* tradition, which holds that the highest achievement in art is to conceal one’s own artfulness, see Paolo D’Angelo, trans. by Sarin Marchetti, *Sprezzatura: concealing the effort of art from Aristotle to Duchamp* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

a surprise palpably different from the sudden, shocking, short-lived sense of the term in Austen’s day and throughout the eighteenth century (and still the baseline assumption in the present). The distinctive nature of this surprise – its prolonged retroactive temporality – and the distinctive pleasures it produces – thinking back and laughing – are what this section seeks to explain.

1.3.1 Thinking Back at Length

The revelation of Frank and Jane’s secret engagement arrives suddenly. Mr Weston escorts Emma to Mrs Weston, alluding to a “most unaccountable business” which only his wife can explain. Mrs Weston tells Emma that Frank has visited that morning “on a most extraordinary errand.” “It is impossible to express our surprise” she asserts, as she briefly defers the revelation and Emma revives both the Frank-desires-Emma and (a more recent addition) Frank-desires-Harriet frames as possible explanations. But Mrs Weston almost immediately comes out with it:

“[…] Frank Churchill and Miss Fairfax are engaged; – nay, […] they have been long engaged!”

Emma even jumped with surprise; – and, horror-struck, exclaimed, “Jane Fairfax! – Good God! You are not serious? You do not mean it?”

Emma is surprised, “horror-struck” even, but not quite for the reason Mrs Weston thinks.

“You may well be amazed,” returned Mrs. Weston, still averting her eyes, and talking on with eagerness, that Emma might have time to recover – “You may well be amazed. […]”

Mrs Weston’s solemnity, her inability to meet Emma’s gaze, hint that she’s continuing to perceive matters through the Emma-may-marry-Frank frame which Emma herself discarded long

126 Austen, p. 257.

127 Austen, p. 259
ago. Indeed, on the walk over Emma noted to herself that the prospect of “poor Frank cut off” would be “no matter of agony to her.” Insofar as she has recently had any designs on Frank marrying, it’s that he should marry Harriet.

There is thus an irony in the phrase “time to recover”: we might even take it as a flicker of free indirect discourse from Mrs Weston, imagining that at this very moment Emma’s heart is breaking. In fact, Emma is recovering from a milder surprise, and she quickly assures Mrs Weston of her “perfect indifference” to Frank romantically. “Recovery,” for Emma, doesn’t mean recovering from heartbreak but – at least initially – thinking back on her former misunderstandings, mentally re-covering past events.

That Emma’s surprise is so strongly retrospective contrasts with Christopher Miller’s account of surprise, and recovery from it, in Austen’s Northanger Abbey and Persuasion. In those two novels, the effect of surprise on characters is primarily emotional and somatic. The heroines of those two novels (so different in other ways) both experience surprise as a painful jolt that requires immediate self-preservation much like touching a hot stove. Their surprises don’t involve intense retrospection. And this is the case even when Northanger Abbey invites readers to savour the revelation that General Tilney had welcomed the heroine Catherine to the Abbey only because – in a scene we witnessed from afar – he’d been lied to about her wealth. It’s a plot twist for readers, but Catherine herself doesn’t look back so far. In Persuasion, the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{128}}\] Austen, p. 258.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{129}}\] Austen, p. 260.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{130}}\] “In retrospect […] upon rereading, it can be seen that the novel has notated not just the components of the genesis of the falsehood about Catherine but even the means of its transmission to General Tilney.” (Davidson, III, p. 303.)
prose turns briefly “cubistic,” registering only visual and auditory fragments, when Anne discovers Frederick is unexpectedly present at a pivotal moment.\textsuperscript{131} Such retrospection as there is concerns the paradox that at the moment of naming or narrating surprise, the surprise itself has already hit. In sum, immediacy characterizes both the surprise and the characters’ need for recovery in these novels. In \textit{Emma}, even the first moment of “jump[ing] with surprise” and being “horror-struck” is not confined entirely to the immediate moment. The misunderstanding between Emma and Mrs Weston makes readers aware that backstory is crucial to the experience of this surprise.

Once Emma has convinced Mrs Weston that this surprise carries no emotional charge for Emma personally, the two spend the remainder of this scene embarking on the retroactive, thinky recovery that this complex surprise demands. Mrs Weston begins to fill Emma in on the backstory she knows: “There has been a solemn engagement between them ever since October – formed at Weymouth, and kept a secret from everybody,”\textsuperscript{132} and Emma finds her “mind […] divided between two ideas – her own former conversations with [Frank] about Miss Fairfax; and poor Harriet.”\textsuperscript{133} Step by step, she and Mrs Weston begin to spell out implications for retroactively making sense of past events:

“[…] What! – engaged to her all the winter – before either of them came to Highbury?”\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{131} Christopher R. Miller, p. 167.
\textsuperscript{132} Austen, p. 259.
\textsuperscript{133} Austen, p. 260.
\textsuperscript{134} Austen, p. 260.
“[…] None of that upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle, that disdain of trick and littleness, which a man should display in every transaction of his life.”135

There are too many past events that need to be rethought, and the conversation concludes with Mrs Weston urging Emma that they should not “be in a hurry to condemn” Frank, as much more material to think back on is still to come. Frank has promised to write Mrs Weston a letter containing

“[…] many particulars that could not be given now. Let us wait, therefore, for this letter. It may bring many extenuations. It may make many things intelligible and excusable which now are not to be understood. […]”136

I want to emphasize here not the excuses and extenuations but the repeated word “many.” Mrs Weston reminds Emma, and readers, that many more things will demand their active re-evaluation before they can be “understood.” Even before such rethinking can occur for Emma or for first-time readers, this statement from Mrs Weston signals to first-time readers that the novel they’ve been innocently reading contains many details that will need to be rethought in light of this new revelation – and which the novel’s characters will guide us through rethinking. What we thought was going on in many earlier moments may now be explained differently: Frank-and-Jane-engaged!

All this retrospection, and the promise of much more to come, establishes that this surprise has been a long time in the making. Emma’s lengthy setup distinguishes the novel from the eighteenth-century conception of surprise as abrupt and short-lived. In particular, it

complicates an influential distinction between surprise and suspense from the German philosopher Lessing:

For one instance where it is useful to conceal from the spectator an important event until it has taken place there are ten and more where interest demands the very contrary. By means of secrecy a poet effects a short surprise, but in what enduring disquietude could he have maintained us if he had made no secret about it!\(^37\)

A page later he repeats (twice, verbatim) the claim that such narrative secrecy produces “a collection of little artistic tricks by means of which we effect nothing more than a short surprise.”\(^38\) For Lessing, surprise was aesthetically inferior to suspense because of its short duration.

In contrast, surprise in *Emma* reaches far back into the narrative past. It’s not the work of a moment, nor are the after-effects short-lived. In fact, in its prolonged deferral of payoff, the plot twist resembles Lessing’s account of suspense much more than surprise. The novel’s construction is that of suspense, even if first-time readers didn’t know it. As such, *Emma*’s surprises fit Caroline Levine’s account of suspense fiction offering “epistemological training, a way to foster energetic skepticism and uncertainty rather than closure and complacency […] teaching readers to suspend judgment,”\(^39\) though the contours of the reading experience are very different.\(^40\)


\(^{138}\) Lessing, p. 378.


\(^{140}\) The affinity between suspense and plot-twist surprise becomes even clearer upon rereading, where dramatic irony characterizes the experience of *Emma* just as it does suspense narratives where readers foresee problems that characters don’t. Andrew Miller has discussed this effect in Austen as readerly “helplessness”: Andrew H. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection*, pp. 123–41.
The surprise in *Emma* goes well beyond the immediate moment in prompting characters and readers to think back, but its temporality also extends forwards into the future in the slowness with which characters must process the surprise. The twist has many ramifications that can’t all immediately be thought through. In this scene, Emma and Mrs Weston begin this time-consuming process, acknowledging that it will occupy them for quite some time. With too much to think about at once, Emma recognizes that she and Mrs Weston can only get so far in the immediate aftermath of this surprise. So, “trying to recover herself” she notes that “this is a circumstance which I must think of at least half a day, before I can at all comprehend it” and speculates that she will “grow reconciled to the idea” only “gradually.”

Emma is right on both counts. She does grow reconciled to the idea, and her time-consuming recovery from the surprise continues through several further scenes stretching over many days. The next chapter opens with Emma alone and plagued by “tormenting ideas which [she can] not get rid of” concerning Harriet’s disappointment. Emma also begins to make sense of Jane’s unexplained rejection of her earlier attempts at kindness: “In Jane’s eyes she had been a rival.” A few chapters later, the letter from Frank arrives and reaffirms that many earlier details need to be rethought:

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141 This may reflect broader nineteenth-century conceptions of reading that emphasize “slow comprehension.” (Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel*, p. 11.)

142 Austen, p. 260.

143 Austen, p. 262.

144 Austen, p. 263.

145 Austen, p. 264.
Whatever strange things I said or did during that fortnight, you have now a key to.\textsuperscript{146}
I must still add to this long letter. You have not heard all that you ought to hear.\textsuperscript{147}

The following chapter begins with Emma reflecting on new things the letter has helped her understand (“though it was impossible not to feel that he had been wrong, yet he had been less wrong than she had supposed”\textsuperscript{148}) and then leads into an extended set piece where Knightley first reads the letter, commenting all the while, before he and Emma discuss its implications.\textsuperscript{149}

The surprise is a long time in the making, and the denouement is correspondingly laborious. Emma and readers must spend a long time thinking back.

\textbf{1.3.2 I Have to Laugh}

The surprise of Frank and Jane’s secret engagement is only really recovered from when Emma and Frank are finally face-to-face again. Even then, Emma is still thinking through earlier events with the benefit of hindsight:

“I do suspect that in the midst of your perplexities at that time, you had very great amusement in tricking us all. […]”

“Oh! no, no, no – how can you suspect me of such a thing? – I was the most miserable wretch!”

“Not quite so miserable as to be insensible to mirth. I am sure it was a source of high entertainment to you, to feel that you were taking us all in. – Perhaps I am the readier to suspect, because, to tell you the truth, I think it might have been some amusement to myself in the same situation. […]”\textsuperscript{150}

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\textsuperscript{146} Austen, p. 288.  \\
\textsuperscript{147} Austen, p. 289.  \\
\textsuperscript{148} Austen, p. 291.  \\
\textsuperscript{149} Discussed in Elfenbein, pp. 39–82.  \\
\textsuperscript{150} Austen, p. 315.
\end{flushright}
Whether Frank’s denial is sincere or not, this interaction serves to make explicit something not only about Emma but about this novel’s approach to surprise. If tragedy + time = comedy, then in *Emma* surprise + time = comedy too. *Emma* is a very funny novel, and so it’s easy to take for granted that the big surprises should lead to laughter. But the novel itself shows that this isn’t a given, nor was it the standard view of surprise in Austen’s time.

In the initial revelation scene, Emma doesn’t laugh. The revelation in fact comes when Emma is at her lowest point in the novel, feeling guilty after Knightley has scolded her for her cruel quip to Miss Bates and regretful that Jane is rebuffing her attempts at kindness. Moreover, while she is not personally distressed at Frank’s secret engagement, Emma does experience negative emotions related to others – shame at having led Harriet to expect a match with Frank, and embarrassment at having gossiped about Jane behind her back to a man who turned out to be her fiancé. Initially Emma doesn’t laugh, nor is the scene played for laughs. Aside from the short-lived dramatic irony around Mrs Weston’s misplaced worry for Emma’s heartbreak, readers aren’t yet invited to dwell on ironies or comedic potential, and are instead drawn along in the process of thinking back along with the two women.

Laughing at the surprise only becomes a possibility once Emma’s shame and embarrassment have been resolved. The embarrassment is dispelled easily: the next time Emma visits Jane, she is greeted with “consciousness, animation, and warmth.” Jane, in fact, feels she is the one who has committed “very great misconduct.” Each apologizes to the other, and claims no
apology is needed from her counterpart. “Let us forgive each other at once,” Emma concludes.¹⁵¹

Done.

Emma’s guilt concerning Harriet is also resolved, with some more complications, with the revelation that Harriet imagined a match with Knightley rather than Frank (so doesn’t regret Frank’s engagement), and the displacement of Harriet’s desires back to the devoted Mr Martin. Until Harriet is happily matched with Mr Martin, Emma doesn’t laugh; as soon as she is, laughter is irresistible. The scene in which Emma learns of Harriet and Mr Martin’s engagement concludes with Emma feeling that until “she had […] laughed and reflected, she could be fit for nothing rational.”¹⁵² Excusing herself from her fiancé and father, she can finally let it out:

Serious she was, very serious in her thankfulness, and in her resolutions; and yet there was no preventing a laugh, sometimes in the very midst of them. She must laugh at such a close!¹⁵³

It’s understandable enough that Emma should feel “joy” and “gratitude” at “The sole grievance […] thus [being] removed in the prospect of Harriet’s welfare.”¹⁵⁴ That she should laugh can’t fully be accounted for by the immediate circumstances: Harriet and Mr Martin’s match is not inherently funny (at an earlier phase of the novel, the prospect in fact filled Emma with revulsion). What’s funny is a much longer series of mistakes and misunderstandings that stretch far back in the novel. Much like the initial surprise, then, this laughter is not a sudden reflex response to immediate stimulus but something that involves thinking back.

¹⁵¹ Austen, p. 302.
¹⁵² Austen, p. 312.
¹⁵³ Austen, p. 313.
¹⁵⁴ Austen, p. 329.
The laughter is also long-lasting. Just as Emma will not soon be done thinking back on the events of the novel, she will not soon be done laughing at them. Nice for her, we might think, but the aforementioned final reunion with Frank and Jane suggests that Emma’s new-found laughter also involves some new, better understanding of herself and the world around her. Now she’s able to speculate that Frank “had very great amusement in tricking” everyone, and that she of all people is qualified to speculate because “it might have been some amusement to myself in the same situation.”\textsuperscript{155} This amused self-knowledge may not carry a great deal of moral weight, but it suggests a more nuanced understanding of her own motives than the benevolence she proclaimed in her role as matchmaker at the start of the novel.

Emma’s thinking back and laughing complicates the aesthetic theories of surprise Austen inherited. In the eighteenth century, surprise was often presumed to serve edifying purposes — as a token of providential grace, as a fleeting moment of pleasure, as a lever of moral commentary, or as a reflexive pause over the operations of the mind. At the same time, surprise was also perceived as a problem or danger: a chaotic energy, an animal reflex, a paralysis of rationality, a reaction to be stoically guarded against, and a watchword for mere novelty or diversion for its own sake.\textsuperscript{156}

Surprise in \textit{Emma} is pleasurable, but not “fleeting.” It prompts not just a “reflexive pause” but extended reflection on “the operations of the mind.” It generates some “moral commentary,” but less than eighteenth-century novels, where surprise is closely connected with feminine virtue. Whether surprise in \textit{Emma} is a “problem or danger” is debatable, but Emma’s thoughtfulness and laughter make clear that any problems or dangers they pose are not very

\textsuperscript{155} Austen, p. 315.

\textsuperscript{156} Christopher R. Miller, p. 12.
severe. The extended backwards- and forwards-looking temporality of *Emma*’s plot twists is far removed from the “sheer brevity” Miller finds in eighteenth-century conceptions of surprise.\(^{157}\)

In Miller’s account, surprise is so brief it’s gone before words can even express it:

> In verbalized form, surprise is for the most part retroactive or revisionary — a post facto expression of a fleeting response. When we say, “I am surprised,” the moment has already passed, or we are using the expression as a formula of judgment rather than reporting an internal state. In this way, utterances of surprise differ from expressions of sustained passions like sadness or anger: these can be simultaneous with their verbal articulation.\(^{158}\)

> In contrast, given the massive rethinking that Emma and first-time readers must engage in, she’s able to verbalize surprise while it’s ongoing: “this is a circumstance which I must think of at least half a day, before I can at all comprehend it.”\(^{159}\)

> Miller claims that by the early twentieth century, the word surprise “became more associated with discovery or delight,” while the sense of surprise as “random or bewildering” is absorbed into a new aesthetics of “shock.”\(^{160}\) *Emma*, and other nineteenth-century plot twists I’ll examine, could be understood as a transitional phase in this history, where surprise can be both initially bewildering and then, with some thought, delightful.

### 1.3.3 Against “I Should’ve Known”

The revelations at the end of *Emma* show readers just how inadequate their understanding of the novel’s events has been. So many secret actions were going on right before our eyes. Indeed, because readers were given plenty of evidence (Frank and Jane knew each other at

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\(^{157}\) Christopher R. Miller, p. 16.

\(^{158}\) Christopher R. Miller, p. 16.

\(^{159}\) Austen, p. 260.

\(^{160}\) Christopher R. Miller, p. 239.
Weymouth; Emma protested too much at the thought of Knightley marrying any other woman) we may feel that we should have perceived what was really going on. As the initial surprise wears off and thinking back continues, we may begin to feel that we should’ve known.

On the basis of my discussion of misdirecting frames, I want to argue that this feeling is misplaced for at least two reasons. Firstly, if by that phrase we understand “could have known, therefore should have known,” my analysis in part 2 shows that not only would such a reader be quite exceptional, they would in fact be failing to make many of the inferences the novel itself invites first-time readers to make through its framing. Until we reach the revelation, we have no reliable basis on which to identify misdirection, nor do we even know that we should be on the alert for it. Even if the Harriet-Elton twist makes us suspicious of Emma’s subsequent matchmaking fantasies, it doesn’t tell us to also suspect secret engagements. Jenny Davidson is right to claim that

though [Emma’s] narrator notes certain interactions or pieces of information that might in the most general sense be said to betray something of that hidden story, they are “unreadable” insofar as they fail to offer themselves at the initial time of reading for satisfactory interpretation. To this I’d add that discovering the “hidden story” is even harder for readers because the initial interpretation feels entirely “satisfactory,” even though it’s not.

Secondly, if by “should have known” we mean “it would have been better if I’d known”, then from an aesthetic standpoint I would respond that it really wouldn’t be better. Seeing through a twist is much less enjoyable than experiencing it as surprising. And anyway, we can experience the pleasures of plot foreknowledge later on by rereading, as Ch.2 investigates. In

161 Davidson, III, p. 304.
contrast, the surprise and subsequent thinking back and laughter are crafted for first-time readers who are only now discovering what has been going on all along.

A third reason to resist “I should’ve known” is to resist its moralizing implications. “Should’ve known” isn’t just an epistemic statement but a judgment of self-blame. While the twist does make Emma feel some (justified) guilt and embarrassment, she never tells herself that she should have known.

It can be tempting to moralize about *Emma*’s twist. Writing in the early 1990s, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick noted Austen scholarship’s investment in “the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson.”162 This “punitive/pedagogical reading”163 infiltrates the very syntax of critics’ prose and

structures sentence after sentence: “Emma…has to be tutored…into correct vision and responsible speech. Anne Elliot has to move, painfully, from an excessive prudence.” […] “Some Jane Austen heroines have to learn their true ‘duties.’ They all have to find their proper homes.”164

“Have to” is a strongly moralizing phrase, especially when used in the third person and most especially with the pronoun “she.” When Emma speaks for herself, in contrast, she says not that she has to be “tutored” but that she has to laugh.

Sedgwick notes that the tradition of “punishing, girl-centered moral pedagogy” positions Austen’s heroines as “isolated” from critics. It’s a ruse for concealing “chains of reader


relations.” Although Sedgwick does not propose an alternative, by focusing on first-time reading we can accept a much closer relationship between readers and Emma, and in so doing reject the idea that a plot twist is a punishment whose value is to teach us a lesson.

**Conclusion: Plot Twists and First-Time Reading**

A critic or scholar or rereader asked to assess “what is going on” in a story with a plot twist will have a different answer from a first-time reader partway through it. They may give an answer like “Frank is *really* flirting with Emma to distract from his secret engagement with Jane” or “Austen is *in fact* misdirecting readers.” Such answers are valid, but they’re the easy answers for people in the know. Just as it’s near-impossible for first-time readers to conjure up the Frank-and-Jane-engaged frame out of thin air before the novel supplies them with it, so it’s all too easy for readers in retrospect to dismiss the misdirecting frames as obviously false. They forget that the seemingly plausible answers earlier in the novel were a finely-wrought edifice: they look back at a collapsed house of cards and neglect the skilful positioning that allowed it to stand up as long as it did.

I’ve focused in this chapter on the Jane-Frank plotline, and besides the various answers I’ve explored to “what’s going on” in it there’s one even more distanced answer, one even broader framing we might give. At the largest scale, we might think about the entire Jane-Frank plotline as itself a misdirection from an even more important surprise: Emma and Knightley’s love match. Like Gérard Genette’s teasing reduction of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* to the sentence “Marcel becomes a writer” (“Marcel devient écrivain”), perhaps all of *Emma* is a

\[\text{\footnotesize\textsuperscript{165}}\] Sedgwick, ‘Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,’ pp. 124, 128.
prolonged deferral of the sentence “Emma marries Knightley.” This needn’t be insulting to the Jane-Frank plotline provided we accept that setup is valuable in its own right, not just as preparation for a payoff.

What does this chapter offer as a starting point for my pre-history of plot twists? Firstly, it’s remarkable how artfully Austen manages multiple twists and a whole network of misdirecting frames to ensure their success. Long before the plot twist became a known entity, writers were building up substantial know-how. Secondly, while in retrospect we can trace patterns of knowing and especially not knowing throughout the novel, for a first-time reader it’s more important that frames produce what Goffman calls “certitude,” a powerful (misplaced) sense that we know what’s going on. A successful twist narrative needs to be ambiguous but not feel ambiguous.

One thing this chapter hasn’t delivered at all is artful close reading. To delve into nuances of meaning and style would pull us further from the ordinary first-time experience I’ve tried to understand, where readers don’t yet have the right frame for scrutinizing Austen’s language. Beyond that, however, while specific twist narratives may reward close reading, I wonder whether the plot twist itself gains much from it. If anything, close reading may serve to justify a work’s value over and above, indeed in spite of, its twist.

In addition, whereas close reading centers unique, counter-intuitive interpretations, frame analysis helps uncover how twist narratives manipulate readers’ responses to be remarkably consistent from one person to the next. This is particularly so on a first reading but, as I show in

166 Genette, p. 30.
Ch.2, rereaders who have one powerful new frame are invited to comprehend a narrative’s pre-twist scenes in relatively circumscribed – though multiple – ways. Literary scholars have gravitated towards unresolvable ambiguity; plot twists structure reading experience as a sharp dichotomy. Perhaps then there’s less of a place for close reading when it comes to understanding plot twists simply because there’s less scope for individual “readings.” The plot twist does the interpretive work, so you don’t have to. This chapter is an experiment in offering a scholarly account of first-time reading while resisting an assertion of my own distinctiveness as a reader.167

* * *

Literary theorists have produced numerous rich theoretical accounts of reading, most of which are, implicitly or explicitly, theories of rereading.168 Theoretical and even practical studies of first-time reading have been few and scattered. While a comprehensive theory of first-time reading is beyond the scope of this chapter, I want to reflect briefly on what this chapter suggests that such a theory should include, and where it can build on existing work.

A theory of first-time reading should be sensitive to what readers don’t (yet) know. Jauss’s account of multiple readings of a Baudelaire poem notes in passing how much understanding is still inaccessible to readers by the end of the first reading; while he fleshes out this limited understanding through rereading, that initial partial understanding, developed line by

167 For a discussion of the value of readers’ diminished individuality see Andrew H. Miller, The Burdens of Perfection.

168 I engage with these theories directly in Ch.2.
line, merits further attention.\textsuperscript{169} In particular, it seems crucial for longer texts such as novels where many readers will only read it once, and any rereading will be further removed in time from the first reading than with a short lyric poem. Having examined Modernist novels that “exploit the naïve sequentiality of first-time reading,” Michaela Bronstein insists that

because any second reading will seem so different, we need to take special care […] not to let the experience of going back to the text with full knowledge become the only form of reading we examine.\textsuperscript{170}

While a true first reading may be irretirevable to the analyst, Bronstein’s close reading of sentence structure aims “after the fact, [to] explain the kinds of investments and reactions particular to the first reading.”\textsuperscript{171} Her method registers how the experience of a sentence or even a larger theme is different when you don’t yet know where it’s going.

Alongside first-time readers’ limited knowledge, limits on memory and attention are inescapable when studying first-time reading. Rereading is appealing to scholars in part because it’s a strategy for overcoming these limits. But if we want to understand reading itself (and not all literary scholarship needs to) we hamper ourselves by viewing inattentiveness as a problem to be overcome. Finite attention is a fact of life and of reading, and needn’t be a cause for despair.

In 1932, philosopher Roman Ingarden offered a lovely account:

the parts and strata of the work being read that can be seen clearly are always different; the rest sink into a semidarkness, a semivagueness, where they only

\textsuperscript{169} Hans Robert Jauss, ‘‘The Poetic Text Within the Change of Horizons of Reading: The Example of Baudelaires “Spleen II”,’’ in \textit{Toward an Aesthetic of Reception}, Theory and History of Literature v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 139–85.

\textsuperscript{170} Michaela Bronstein, ‘‘How Not to Re-read Novels: The Critical Value of First Reading,’’ \textit{Journal of Modern Literature}, 39.3 (2016), 76–94 (p. 84).

\textsuperscript{171} Bronstein, ‘‘How Not to Re-read Novels,’’ p. 84.
covibrate and cospeak, and, precisely because of this, they color the totality of the work in a particular manner.\textsuperscript{172}

Why would we pass up the opportunity to study these nuances of “color”? The frames I’ve examined in this chapter work in just this way – we experience them less as words on the page than as a “semivagueness” that nonetheless “colors” what’s in front of us. Ingarden’s picture of shadowy richness contrasts with Percy Lubbock’s lament for the foggy landscape (“some clear points emerging from a mist of uncertainty”) when thinking back on a novel.\textsuperscript{173} But imperfect memory too, once accepted, can lead to rich literary study, as in Andrew Elfenbein’s account of how “gist” memory functions both during and after reading.\textsuperscript{174}

Beginnings, middles and endings would take on new kinds of significance in a theory of first-time reading. Endings would diminish in importance, at least as a known entity, though expectations about endings (especially if eventually unfulfilled) would be all the more important. Peter Brooks’s study of “the temporal dynamics that shape narratives in our reading of them, […] makes us turn pages and strive toward narrative ends”\textsuperscript{175} offers one model, though his focus on “desire” minimizes the role of knowledge and expectation that matter so much for plot twists.

I appreciate Marianna Torgovnick’s comment that

The process of reading without knowing endings is […] rather like the process of day-to-day living: we make tentative guesses at direction and meaning by applying our experience of what the data we encounter usually lead to and mean.

\textsuperscript{172} Ingarden, p. 334.
\textsuperscript{173} Lubbock, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{174} Elfenbein.
\textsuperscript{175} Brooks, p. xiii.
However, Torgovnick overstates the importance of endings in claiming that “to study closure is to re-create and re-experience fiction with unusual vividness.”176 With plot twists this is simply not true: to “re-experience” these works we need to go back to a phase before “closure” and linger there.

Beginnings, too, might diminish somewhat, almost immediately functioning as “gist” rather than shaping the reading experience in detail. In contrast, studying first-time reading might redirect our attention towards narrative middles. In her sociological study of romance readers, Janice Radway notes that readers “placed heavy emphasis on the importance of development in the romance’s portrayal of love.”177 Discussing the apparent paradox of readers choosing to “spoil” the ending before reading the novel, Radway notes that one participant “sees no contradiction in desiring an unpredictable plot and wanting to know how it ends before she reads it.”178 With a richer conception of both narrative middles and first-time reading, this might not seem like a contradiction at all: what these readers care about is how the romance develops, not how it (predictably) ends.179

Focusing on middles also reinforces issues of readers’ knowledge. David Kurnick has suggested that “readerly desire” can “be directed not toward the achievement of closure but


177 Radway, p. 65, emphasis Radway’s.

178 Radway, p. 199.

179 The longer book-historical roots of this practice are discussed by Christina Lupton:

“As objects available and responsive to selective rereading, codex books can be extracted, abridged, and taken up in part even as they stay fundamentally whole in their original form. […] any plot-level deferral of a character’s happiness can […] be offset through a reader’s use of material strategies, such as skipping ahead or selective rereading, that defy the imperatives of plot.” (Lupton, p. 78.)
instead toward an immersion in the details and complications of middles.”

In his account of *Middlemarch*, immersion in the middle isn’t mindless wallowing but gives unique access to social knowledge. Whereas “traditional narrative analysis sees novelistic form as wedded to a socially conservative project of closing down problematic desires through the resolution of plot,” middles offer less constraining accounts of desire and social norms. Although not focused on first-time reading per se, Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles’s edited collection *Narrative Middles* urges appreciation of “the humbling, interesting, disorienting experience of living in the middle.” Particularly relevant to plot twists is their question “what kind of knowledge do we learn to seek, and what can we know *in medias res*?” Any answer we might give to this question would need to distinguish between rereaders and first-time readers.

A theory of first-time reading needs to work with multiple kinds of literary unit. At the sentence-level, Stanley Fish has extensively explored how the order in which readers encounter words in a sentence plays a role in the reading experience. In this chapter I’ve argued for frames as a slightly larger unit of analysis. In other cases, topos or genre may be crucial factors (is this a story of rags to riches? is this a romcom or a melodrama?). Motif and character might also be re-examined from the perspective of someone who doesn’t yet know what the eventual pattern or arc will be. J. Hillis Miller has noted that while “A novel is interpreted in part through the noticing of […] recurrences,” this “noticing” is not guaranteed and certainly not immediate.

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180 Kurnick, p. 597.
181 Kurnick, p. 596.
182 Levine and Ortiz-Robles, pp. 11, 19.
“The first instance of the color red” in Tess of the D’Urbervilles “may be passed over as trivial or as merely representational” and “red begins to stand out as a salient motif” only “When the reader encounters the third, the fourth, and the fifth red things.”

Nor does a study of first-time reading need to be limited to an individual work, as I’ve approached it here. Poetry books, novel series and play cycles are some self-evident examples where multiple works can valuably be considered together. Going beyond the work in another direction, the “pre-reading environment” I theorize in Ch.4 also plays an important role in first-time reading (what’s a first-time reading experience of Emma for someone who’s seen Clueless?).

A theory of first-time reading accepts “reading’s duration.” Its conception of “form” would be, as nineteenth-century physiological novel theorists had it, “thoroughly temporal.” It would resist the impulse of “transform[ing] a temporal experience into a spatial one.” It would not place itself “at odds with the temporal nature of the analyzed work,” a tendency in literary


185 Cognitive linguist Joan Bybee makes a complementary claim about the mind’s sensitivity to verbal repetition: “While the effects of frequency are often not noted until some degree of frequency has accumulated, there is no way for frequency to matter unless even the first occurrence of an item is noted in memory. Otherwise, how would frequency accumulate? [...] [T]he verbatim form of an experienced token [i.e. use of a word] must have some (possibly small) impact on cognitive representation, even if it cannot be recalled accurately afterwards.” (Joan Bybee, Language, Usage and Cognition (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 18.)

186 Lupton, p. 1.

187 Dames, The Physiology of the Novel, p. 10.

188 Fish, pp. 140–41.
theory whose centuries-long history Catherine Gallagher has traced. Sometimes the time reading takes up might be an inconvenience, but the plot twist, for example, makes reading time into an asset to enhance its big surprise.

Finally, a theory of first-time reading should unsettle some of our assumptions about the persona or ethos of the literary scholar. James Wood has ventriloquized the standard attitude:

Scholars don’t want to be caught in the act of primacy when they are supposed to have read the book a thousand times; God forbid that anyone should think we are encountering a text for the first time! Of course we all remember the ins and outs, the ups and downs, the twists and turns of Waverley or Vanity Fair or Under the Volcano! Don’t we?

Wood has in mind a contrast with reviewers, professionally constrained to record and publish their first impressions of a brand-new book (though even reviewers can selectively reread…). There’s prestige and authority in the pose of having read every book a thousand times. What might scholars learn from reviewers about accepting that your first reading might come back to embarrass you? Or more radically, should we reject the idea that our first reading should ever be a cause for embarrassment? Should we, like Emma, just look back, think and laugh?

This doesn’t have to lead to self-abasement or melancholy about the supposedly fresher, more authentic reading experiences which we can no longer access. Instead, it should lead to valuable self-reflexiveness about our own practices of knowledge production. What kinds of knowledge about reading are scholars (and any rereaders) unable to access directly? When should we doubt our own intuitions about a work of literature, and by what methods can we best explain the delicate collaboration between a literary work and a reader who doesn’t yet know

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189 Gallagher, p. 231.

where it’s heading? What else besides twist narratives have we avoided studying because their effect resides so much in the first-time reading?
Chapter 2. Disillusioned Ironizing and Vicarious Crafting: Rereading *Great Expectations* for the Twist

Introduction: Why Revisit a Twist?

Detractors of plot twists view them as cheap, disposable tricks. They “[seek] only for novelty” and are therefore “so far-fetched, as to be not only unexpected, but unnatural.”¹⁹¹ They are too “odd” to last “long,” leading one critic to confidently pronounce that the plot twist “did not last.” They provide a momentary flash of the “unexpected” and then are deservedly forgotten. Their “ingenuity is more striking than [their] justness.”¹⁹² They “take the intellect by surprise, seeming sound and conclusive at first sight. But upon examination they dissolve into empty fallacies.”¹⁹³ Another critic has complained they are “no better than riddles” which are “dark and troublesome,” “not only to the reader” but also “to the Writer himself.” The “trouble” plot twists cause both readers and writers hints at their peculiar relationship to literary labor: twists are “overrated devices that strike us as working too little” – a plot point that can be summarized in one sentence is made to carry the narrative interest of an entire novel – “but also as working too hard” – so much writerly effort is needed before the revelation in order to pull off the big surprise.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, readers too are pushed both to work too hard – we are tasked to read a narrative which won’t make complete sense until a crucial bit of information, long withheld, is eventually given to us – and also work too little – once the twist is revealed,


everything fits together neatly and we can switch off our brains. Because the revelation of a twist short-circuits readers’ interpretive activities, they are “a one-time device which must be thrown away once the trick [...] has been performed.”195 To their detractors, whatever momentary jolt a twist gives readers, they offer little more afterwards to stick around for.

If you haven’t noticed already, the previous paragraph was playing a trick on you. The quotations I presented as speaking to plot twists in fact refer to other literary devices of dubious worth: the early-modern poetic “conceit” and the twentieth-century “gimmick.” You may be tempted to reread the previous paragraph now, scrutinize its citations and think about what you understand differently in light of these passages being wrenched from their original context. You might also reflect on my activity in producing the paragraph: the passages quoted are — as conceits and gimmicks were accused of being — farfetched; I gathered them from contexts far removed from any thought of plot twists. You might even be a little annoyed with me.

My reason for beginning with this small gimmick of my own, however, is to make you palpably aware of how the revelation of a twist prompts new thoughts and new feelings in you, the reader. This chapter is about what can happen when we reread a twist narrative, and why anybody would do it.

Why return to a plot twist once you know what’s really going on? Whether or not you value the first-time experience of a twist, there’s a widespread sense that revisiting a twist is pointless. Certainly you can revisit it to satisfy technical curiosity about how the writer pulled it off, and whether they “played fair,” but this seems less like reading in all its aesthetic and

humanistic richness than like an engineer’s appraisal. You can of course also reread twist
narratives for other things beside the twist – for characters, for atmosphere, for style – but the
twist itself seems to offer only an impoverished interpretive activity second time around. In this
view, a twist is a disposable one-time trick, a party popper that fires once and whose contents are
then to be swiftly swept up and binned.\footnote{The anxiety over spoilers (which I discuss in more detail in Ch.4) also attests to the sense of the twist’s disposability: a twist might not even be worth experiencing \textit{once} if you already know what’s coming.}

In this chapter I argue that revisiting plot twists is valuable because of the complex
cognitive and affective activities it allows readers to engage in. I’m thus arguing against the
position that plot twists have minimal value for revisiting. But because plot twists haven’t
received sustained scholarly attention, it’s hard to find explicit claims about their disposability.
Hence my detour into the aesthetic debates around the alleged disposability of conceits and
gimmicks. I believe the same aesthetic presuppositions underpin the scholarly disdain for the
twist, and that in all cases the disparagement depends on downplaying or outright ignoring what
might happen in readers’ minds \textit{after} the first reading is complete.

Understanding why a good twist rewards revisiting requires understanding rereading as
simultaneously creative and constrained. In this chapter, I present two distinct activities –
“disillusioned ironizing” and “vicarious crafting” – which rereaders can engage in when
rereading a twist narrative. Both of these activities are characterized by the opening up of
multiple but constrained interpretive possibilities. Rereading in either of these modes does not
lead to one definitive understanding, but nor is it a free-for-all of meaning making. Instead,
rereading in these ways requires closely collaborating with – and yet going beyond – the words
on the page. I represent this collaboration graphically throughout the chapter with *square brackets* for disillusioned ironizing and *strikethrough text* for vicarious crafting, to indicate readers’ supplements to the words on the page.

To make the case for twists’ non-disposability, this chapter answers the question: what can readers do when rereading a twist narrative? The chapter is thus a counterpart to the previous chapter on first-time reading. In order to understand the plot twist it’s important to attend carefully to the stark differences, as well as the relations, between pre-reveal and post-reveal reading (or put another way, between experiences where readers don’t know the twist and experiences where they do).

I’ve chosen *Great Expectations* as the twist narrative to reread. It offers a number of advantages for this purpose, as well as some limitations. It sits alongside *Emma, Jane Eyre* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as one of the best-known nineteenth-century twists to this day. The twist is kept in the general consciousness both through being read for pleasure and assigned in schools and universities. The numerous movie and TV adaptations contribute further to knowledge of the twist. This all suggests that the narrative is not exhausted once you know the twist: people keep coming back for new retellings, even when the twist is common knowledge. The plot of *Great Expectations* is evidently far from disposable.

As a case study for developing a general account of rereading twists, *Great Expectations* also has some limitations. Here I’ll mention one that troubled me most as I reread the novel and prepared to write this chapter: rereading *Great Expectations* can be a real downer. I want to give – and will give – an account of why readers value revisiting this and other twist narratives, and yet rereading the novel knowing the twist foregrounds just how misplaced the protagonist’s great
expectations are, and how disappointing his life turns out to be. While the twist may be finely
crafted, revisiting it doesn’t necessarily make readers feel good.

Still, perhaps the feelings of hopelessness, regret and gloom that knowledge of the
novel’s twist can produce are a useful spur to distinguishing the general from the particular.
Since many twists (Emma’s, to give an example I’ve already discussed in Ch.1) don’t produce
such sad rereading responses, these can’t be an essential feature of twists in general.
Nonetheless, a theory of the twist will need to make room for such responses. The first section of
this chapter attempts to explain these divergent responses through what I call disillusioned
ironizing. While disillusioned ironizing may leave rereaders of GE feeling melancholy, it can
also produce affects as varied as cynical superiority in, say, a Balzac novel or indulgent delight
in the case of Emma.

The second section of this chapter presents a second mode of reading that rereading a
twist narrative knowing the plot can produce: I call this “vicarious crafting.” Reading in this way
involves a shift in focus from the diegetic level of the characters and the novel’s world to extra-
diegetic aspects such as the narrator and the author. As such, readers become less caught up in
the events and experiences depicted in the novel and instead come to appreciate the artfulness of
the novel’s creator: not its diegetic fictional author (the older Pip looking back on his life) and
also not quite its real flesh-and-blood author Charles Dickens, but another figure who sits
somewhere in between: readers’ projection of an author figure, which for convenience I’ll call
“Dickens.” Through vicarious crafting, readers experience what it might have been like to craft
the novel’s illusions that misdirect characters and first-time readers.

In various ways these two modes of reading are complementary:
These two modes of reading exemplify the complex, sophisticated act of collaboration that rereading a twist narrative can involve. These two modes by no means exhaustively encompass the wide range of possible rereading practices. People can revisit a narrative whose outcome they already know for many purposes where these two practices need not arise: to write a paper, to prepare for an exam, as an annual tradition, to relive an earlier time in their own life… The reason I present these two modes of reading is because they seem to me to be the two modes most relevant specifically to rereading twist narratives as twist narratives. Without excluding the many other possible ways a twist narrative may be reread, my aim is that disillusioned ironizing and vicarious crafting will have explanatory value for many more twist narratives.

For convenience I’ll sometimes talk of “disillusioned ironizers” and “vicarious crafters,” but these terms should not be taken to imply two distinct groups of readers. Any given reader
may oscillate between the two modes, even while examining a single word, or may remain in one mode or the other for the entire rereading. I don’t want to imply value judgments about these two modes or about the readers who do or don’t engage in them. I am not offering a normative account but rather a descriptive account of how specific features of certain narratives lead to distinctive processes of thinking and feeling.

The two modes of rereading I develop in this chapter build on established theories of reading and narrative (and the smaller bodies of theory on rereading narratives) produced by literary scholars.

Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* is often taken to offer a general theory of reading. Richard Howard’s preface to the English edition calls it “the most sustained yet pulverized meditation on reading […] in all of Western critical literature.” Yet Barthes himself states at the outset that he will “rea[d] the text as if it had already been read” – a “rereading,” in other words. What Barthes doesn’t state is that his rereading is not just of any text but of a twist narrative, Balzac’s “Sarrasine.” In fact, Barthes’s broader conception of reading, and the politics underpinning it, prevent him from attending to the twistiness of his object of study. For Barthes, first-time reading is associated with (bad, capitalist, consumerist) “consumption” whereas rereading is (liberatory, anarchic) “play,” specifically the quintessential poststructuralist play of “multiply[ing] the signifiers, not to reach some ultimate signified.” Both the modes of rereading that I develop in this chapter do involve readers “multiplying signifiers,” but they do so

197 Barthes, p. viii.
198 Barthes, p. 15.
199 Barthes, p. 165.
within the sharply defined terms set up by the text.\textsuperscript{200} Barthes’s ideal is the “absolutely plural text”\textsuperscript{201} where meaning-making is endless and inconclusive, and he only begrudgingly turns in \textit{S/Z} to a “classic” (i.e. nineteenth-century realist) text offering only a “limited” plurality of meanings.\textsuperscript{202} In contrast, I argue that the plot twist depends on this “limited” interpretive plurality, and that the value of rereading twists resides in readers moving skilfully within the interpretive bounds established by the text.

I follow Peter Brooks’s \textit{Reading for the Plot} in assessing plot from the perspective of readers’ experience (in contrast to more distanced, “excessively static” structuralist/formalist analyses), thus approaching plot as a “dynamic operation” that unfolds over time.\textsuperscript{203} Indeed, Brooks is especially valuable for my purposes since he discusses several twist narratives, including \textit{Great Expectations}, Balzac’s “Sarrasine” and Maupassant’s “Une ruse.” Yet I diverge from Brooks in two major ways. Firstly, by distinguishing more sharply between first-time reading and rereading. Secondly, by expanding beyond his (Freudian) emphasis on \textit{desires} as the “energy” or “forces”\textsuperscript{204} motivating reading to also include knowledge. The two are in fact related: Brooks ostensibly offers an account of first readings, yet many of his analyses presuppose knowledge of the narrative’s end: his approach is thus unable to account either for

\footnotesize

\begin{quote}
I’m thinking of the relationship between reader and text as something like the relationship between a musical score and a musician. In both cases, there is scope for creativity within a firmly delimited structure, but we recognize this creativity more easily in musicians than in readers. As a slogan I once saw on the Berlin metro put it, “Nicht nur Schreiben, sondern auch Lesen, ist eine Kunst” – not only writing but also reading is an art.
\end{quote}

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{200} Barthes, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{201} Barthes, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{202} Barthes, pp. xiii, xiv.
\textsuperscript{203} Brooks, p. xiv.
what *not* knowing the end does to first-time readers, or for what *knowing* the end means for rereaders. For the purposes of twists, questions of “memory” and “expectation,” which Brooks repeatedly discusses as phenomena of desire, demand to be thought of in terms of knowledge.

* * *

I begin by briefly sketching out the contours of a first-time reading of *Great Expectations*.

Initially apprenticed to his older sister’s husband Joe to learn the trade of blacksmith, Pip one day learns that an anonymous benefactor has intended for him to have “great expectations.” Pip learns this from Mr. Jaggers, the lawyer of the wealthy eccentric Miss Havisham, who has over the years taken an interest in Pip. Jaggers insists, however, that the benefactor wishes to remain anonymous for the time being, and Pip must not allude to their identity in any way.

After indirectly thanking Miss Havisham, who in turn drops some hints that Pip will inherit her fortune, Pip travels to London to begin life as a gentleman. Despite becoming educated in high culture and joining privileged social circles, the “great expectations” mostly make Pip unhappy – he runs up debts and only pretends to enjoy himself. His only hope of happiness is that he may eventually win the heart of Estella, Miss Havisham’s ward, and that Miss Havisham’s intention is in fact to make a match between them.

After first two thirds of the novel have established the protagonist Pip’s “great expectations,” the twist and its further ramifications then gradually extinguish them. One night, when Pip is 23, an older man appears at his door. Pip recognizes him as Magwitch, a convict who young Pip encountered in the midst of an escape. Pip brought him food and a file to remove his shackles, though Magwitch was nonetheless soon recaptured. Magwitch was deported to
Australia, and now tells Pip he became very rich through trade there. The twist: Magwitch has all along been Pip’s anonymous benefactor!

The great expectations which had fuelled Pip’s goals and desires in the first phase of the novel give way to disillusionment here. Pip, and first-time readers with him, look back on what they now recognize as their former illusions. Miss Havisham never cared about Pip, and did not intend him as a match for Estella. The money that allowed Pip to become a gentleman didn’t come from an eccentric heiress but from a deported convict. Pip’s status as aspiring gentleman has been built on fictions and misunderstandings.

The remainder of the novel gradually extinguishes all remaining hopes for the good life Pip expected to lead. Maybe he could still marry Estella? No: Estella marries another man, the odious Drummle. Maybe Pip could be happy married to his childhood friend Biddy? No: she’s already engaged to Joe. Maybe Pip will at least help Magwitch (who’ll be hanged if caught in Britain) escape to safety? No: they’re caught at the last minute while trying to escape, and Magwitch dies in prison. Maybe Pip will nonetheless inherit Magwitch’s fortune? No: it’s seized by the state.

In the novel’s final chapters, Pip leaves Britain for Egypt, and spends more than a decade working as an undistinguished shipbroker there. In the novel’s final scene Pip returns to Miss Havisham’s now ruined house, where he meets the now widowed Estella. Despite a glimmer of hope that the two may finally be united, the novel ends on a note of loss, regret and quashed expectations.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ The summary of Great Expectations I’ve given here doesn’t account for the extensive, skillfully deployed misdirecting frames that run through the pre-twist phase of the novel. It would be possible to
As this summary suggests, disillusioned ironizing can begin even on the first reading as soon as the twist is revealed. In the next section I discuss the mechanisms and emotional quality of disillusioned ironizing, but for now only want to note that it involves both an epistemic-perceptual component (new knowledge allows you to recognize certain things as illusory which you previously took to be real) and an affective component (this new understanding makes you feel a certain way). The English word “disillusioned” in fact equivocates between both senses, and in the case of *Great Expectations* both apply: being disillusioned by the twist also makes you feel disillusioned.

This isn’t, however, how every twist makes every person feel. In my analysis of *Great Expectations* I attempt to disentangle the epistemic-perceptual from the affective because this is necessary for a broader theory of the plot twist. While all plot twists involve epistemic-perceptual disillusionment, the affective responses they produce can vary enormously. More broadly, my conception of reading is one in which cognition and affect are inextricably (but not deterministically) intertwined.

write an entire chapter, like Ch.1 on the first-time reading of *Emma*, analyzing the distinctive strategies for misdirecting first-time readers of *Great Expectations*.

Some of these would overlap with *Emma*, for instance the unmarked transitions between focalized and non-focalized narration (e.g. “[Herbert] as perfectly understood Miss Havisham to be my benefactress, as I understood the fact myself” (Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by Margaret Cardwell and Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 168.)) and the use of paragraphing and chapter boundaries to foreground misdirecting frames (e.g. the one-sentence paragraph “My dream was out; my wild fancy was surpassed by sober reality; Miss Havisham was going to make my fortune on a grand scale.” (Dickens, p. 125.)) A non-exhaustive list of this novel’s misdirecting frames would include: Miss-Havisham-takes-an-interest-in-Pip’s-future, Miss-Havisham-intends-Pip-to-marry-Estella, Magwitch-may-taint-Pip-by-association, Magwitch-is-poor…

For the purposes of this chapter, the skillful misdirection of first-time readers who don’t know the twist will not be my focus but is nonetheless an essential background in response to which the modes of rereading I discuss become possible.
The experience I call vicarious crafting can also begin as soon as Magwitch’s revelation begins. To take just one example, after the revelation Pip reflects that “Miss Havisham’s intentions towards [him]” were “all a mere dream,” and that he “only suffered in Satis House as a convenience, a sting for the greedy relations.” Readers who remember, or flick back to, the scene where Miss Havisham dropped hints about being Pip’s benefactor will now notice that Sarah Pocket was present, and Miss Havisham paid close attention to how furious the hints made her.

We begin to understand how an illusion was crafted for Pip by other characters, but may also move beyond the characters to think about the role played by the author in this illusion-making: at this point we are engaging in vicarious crafting. Situations that we had taken to be matters of chance on the level of characters may, from the perspective of vicarious crafting, also reveal themselves as deliberate choices by the author: Dickens chose to surround Miss Havisham with relatives she resented at least in part to allow for this piece of illusion-making. Sarah Pocket was not there by chance that day, but because the intended audience for Miss Havisham’s misleading hints about being Pip’s benefactor was not Pip himself but Sarah, and because Dickens needed a pretext to motivate Miss Havisham pretending to be Pip’s benefactor.

Both of these modes of reading become possible, retrospectively, as soon as the twist is revealed, and as such the last third of Great Expectations is, in a loosely metaphorical sense, a “rereading” of the first two thirds. Events and situations from the first part are revisited and

206 Dickens, p. 295.
readers now understand they’re different from what they seemed. Nonetheless, in the sections to follow I focus on a proper rereading of the novel, and in particular on its pre-reveal phase. Why? Because only at this point do the words before readers’ eyes offer themselves up to my two modes of rereading; the post-twist first reading instead operates by making readers cast their minds back to earlier parts of the novel, the text itself no longer aims to misdirect. And as Andrew Elfenbein has discussed, readers’ verbatim memory is extremely limited: it’s therefore only upon an actual rereading that we’re able to appreciate the linguistic ingeniousness that went unnoticed on first reading.

One further way in which I’ve focused the scope of the chapter is by only considering what I take to be the novel’s main twist: that Magwitch, not Miss Havisham, is Pip’s benefactor. As with *Emma*, twists don’t come singly in *Great Expectations*. Two other twists further complicate Pip’s relations to both Magwitch and Miss Havisham: first, that Miss Havisham was jilted because of a plot by Magwitch’s nemesis Compeyson; second, that Magwitch is the father of Miss Havisham’s ward Estella. There are also smaller-scale twist-like surprises: that Compeyson was sitting behind Pip at the theater; that Biddy is in love with and engaged to Joe; that it was Orlick who attacked Mrs Joe. There are also twists that characters experience, but even first-time readers aren’t surprised by, e.g. Herbert learning years later that Pip funded his entry into the shipbroker business. And there are twists that might have been but never become

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207 Indeed, after the initial scenes in Pip’s childhood, most of the scenes of the novel, even before the twist, involve him revisiting places he’s already been before, and noting how far they’ve changed.

208 Elfenbein, p. 21.
known: Joe never learns that Pip had intended to marry Biddy, for example. These are beyond the scope of my chapter, but are part of the intricate tapestry of the novel’s surprises.

2.1 Disillusioned Ironizing

When rereading a twist narrative, a host of previously unremarkable moments become imbued with dramatic irony. You know more than the characters do, you see them misunderstanding each other and making mistakes, and, even if you want to, can do nothing to avoid the inevitable. We tend to discuss dramatic irony in cases where it is built in from the first time: every audience member knows more than the characters in Phèdre or The Comedy of Errors, for example. Disillusioned ironizing is my term for the rarer dramatic irony which emerges only on rereading (or, at a pinch, a spoiled first reading). It’s dramatic irony that follows a first reading characterized by misdirection.

Although disillusioned ironizers shake off some of the novel’s illusions which had earlier seemed real, they by no means reject the overall illusion that is the novel’s fictional world. On the contrary, while rereaders can now see through the illusions related to the twist, this only serves to intensify the illusion of the novel’s fictional reality. Recognizing characters’ mistakes and misunderstandings rests on readers now having a firm sense of what’s (fictionally) real. The illusion of the diegesis, in other words, remains intact and if anything is strengthened. Unlike the extra-diegetic focus of vicarious crafters, who view the novel as a fictional object, disillusioned ironizers continue to suspend disbelief, immersing themselves in the characters’ world.

We might think of disillusioned ironizing as a close reading of a slightly different novel from the Great Expectations of first-time readers. In this new novel, between the lines, a previously unheard omniscient narrator is whispering ironically to readers about everything the characters don’t know. The phrase “little did I/he/she/we/they know…” can help illustrate
disillusioned reading in practice, and I’ll use *curly brackets* to indicate this “reading between the lines” in action. To start, I’ll offer a few brief examples before turning to key scenes where disillusioned reading seems particularly inviting.

They had no doubt that Miss Havisham would “do something” for me; their doubts related to the form that something would take. My sister stood out for “property.” Mr. Pumblechook was in favour of a handsome premium for binding me apprentice to some genteel trade\(^{209}\) *Little did they know that, besides a few crowns, Miss Havisham would deliver me nothing but pain.*

I lay on the earthwork for some time with my chin on my hand, descrying traces of Miss Havisham and Estella all over the prospect, in the sky and in the water\(^{210}\) *Little did I know that all my relations with them would be as insubstantial as the clouds and ripples before my eyes.*

“Well?” said she, fixing her eyes upon me. “I hope you want nothing? You’ll get nothing.”\(^{211}\) *Little did I know how truly she meant this.*

My dream was out; my wild fancy was surpassed by sober reality; Miss Havisham was going to make my fortune on a grand scale.\(^{212}\) *Little did I know, Magwitch was my real benefactor, and Miss Havisham only intended to torture me, as well as her relatives.*

I had often thought before, with something allied to shame, of my companionship with the fugitive […] My comfort was, that it happened a long time ago, and that he had doubtless been transported a long way off, and that he was dead to me, and might be veritably dead into the bargain.\(^{213}\) *Little did I know that, far from dead, he had dedicated his life to making the money he was now sending me, and that he would not remain a long way off forever.*

Without being written in to the words on the page, dramatic irony emerges very readily from moments such as these for rereaders who know where the narrative is heading, and what illusions the characters are currently under. Whether readers want to attribute this virtual ironic

\(^{209}\) Dickens, p. 63.

\(^{210}\) Dickens, p. 100.

\(^{211}\) Dickens, p. 105.

\(^{212}\) Dickens, p. 125.

\(^{213}\) Dickens, p. 133.
voice to the narrator (everything the older Pip could be saying but withholds for the benefit of first-time readers) or to themselves (everything I understand now because I know the twist) matters less than that it rests on a firm knowledge of diegetic events to come.  

An audience’s certainty about the outcome of a narrative when revisiting it is by no means a given, but relies in large part on the affordances of specific media, in this case the fixedness of print. To unsettle the association of rereading with narrative foreknowledge, we might think of digital fiction, where at least in principle each reading may produce different outcomes, but also of oral storytelling, where taking creative license with an existing story is always a possibility. Even books and other such stably repeatable narrative media like movies and television leave open the slim possibility of difference: the two endings of Great Expectations are a case in point, and we might also think of directors’ cuts of movies or television shows re-edited to air on a different channel or at a different time of day. Nonetheless the working assumption with these media is that the narrative will remain identical from one experience to the next.

While individual sentences scattered throughout the novel can prompt disillusioned ironizing, certain key scenes offer especially rich material for disillusioned ironizing. In the remainder of this section, I examine four of these scenes in order both to analyze more sustained, complex experiences of disillusioned reading and also to examine how these epistemic-perceptual experiences relate to readers’ emotional response.

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214 Great Expectations has a first-person retrospective narrator, and in this respect is much like Jane Eyre. With other kinds of narrator, especially third-person extra-diegetic narrators, we may not attribute this superior knowledge to any characters but to a narrator more closely aligned with the author figure.
2.1.1 Pip and Jaggers at Cross Purposes (Irony I)

I begin with the first scene announcing Pip’s “great expectations.” One night at the pub in the local village, a “stranger” asks after “an apprentice […] commonly known as Pip”.

The stranger did not recognise me, but I recognised him as the gentleman I had met on the stairs, on the occasion of my second visit to Miss Havisham.\textsuperscript{215} [Little did I know that Miss Havisham was but one of his many clients, and that he came to me that day not as her agent but as Magwitch’s.]

The man introduces himself as Jaggers, describing himself as “a lawyer in London” and “pretty well known.” Disillusioned ironizers may already note that both the mention of London and being “well known” hint at a much broader client pool beyond simply Miss Havisham. Jaggers immediately launches into a number of disclaimers: he disapproves of the business, and “If [his] advice had been asked” he would not have advised it. But “It was not asked” – first-time readers may think here of Miss Havisham’s peremptoriness, repeatedly on display in recent chapters; disillusioned ironizers may think further back to Magwitch’s blunt wilfulness in the novel’s opening scene. In short, disillusioned ironizers can infer what Jaggers knows in this scene, but strategically withholds, and align themselves with this knowledge over and against what Pip thinks he knows, which is all that first-time readers have access to.

Jaggers also insists that he is acting only “as the confidential agent of another,”\textsuperscript{216} which disillusioned ironizers can recognize as Jaggers’s characteristically evasive legalese. This careful attention to Jaggers’s speech has already been prepared for by the preceding events at the pub, where Jaggers cross-examined Mr. Wopsle’s hasty pronouncement on a trial. Disillusioned ironizers can also continue to identify Jaggers’s legally tricksy speech throughout the present

\textsuperscript{215} Dickens, p. 124.

\textsuperscript{216} Dickens, p. 124.
scene in his consistent avoidance of gendered pronouns to refer to Pip’s benefactor (cf. “the present possessor of that property,” “the person from whom I take my instructions,” “the person who is your liberal benefactor,” “the individual,” etc.) as well as his quibble with Pip over whether he “recommends” or only “mentions” Matthew Pocket as a tutor.

Most of the dramatic irony in this scene concerns Pip’s misunderstanding about the identity of his benefactor, and for the most part disillusioned ironizers are aligned with Jaggers’s knowledge. For one brief moment, however, the dramatic irony also seems to touch him, when Pip cautiously asks whether there would “be any objection to my taking leave of any one I know, about here, before I go away.” He speaks with a newly acquired Jaggers-like vagueness, careful not to name or even imply Miss Havisham. Jaggers, in turn, replies that there is no objection, while “looking as if he hardly understood me.” Perhaps the young Pip merely misinterpreted Jaggers’s poker face, but it seems equally possible that Pip’s misapprehension has not yet occurred to him. While Jaggers certainly discovers the error before Pip does, this initial exchange may be a genuine conversation at cross purposes, with dramatic irony affecting both parties.

A further, more fleeting source of dramatic irony in this scene concerns not the identity of Pip’s benefactor but the future rift in Pip’s relationship with Joe. As Joe refuses compensation for releasing Pip from his apprenticeship, the older narrator breaks in with a brief regretful apostrophe:

O dear good Joe, whom I was so ready to leave and so unthankful to, I see you again, with your muscular blacksmith’s arm before your eyes, and your broad chest

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218 Dickens, p. 127.
219 Dickens, p. 130.
heaving, and your voice dying away. O dear good faithful tender Joe, I feel the loving tremble of your hand upon my arm, as solemnly this day as if it had been the rustle of an angel’s wing!

But I encouraged Joe at the time. I was lost in the mazes of my future fortunes.²²₀

Such moments of prolepsis are rare in *Great Expectations*, and references to the timeframe from which the adult narrator speaks even rarer. A first-time reader doesn’t yet know what’s to come, but can at least infer from this moment that Pip pursuing his “great expectations” will not end as happily as he hopes. Disillusioned ironizers, on the other hand, may mentally flash forward through the rest of the novel, aware that despite ups and downs Pip and Joe will never again be “the best of friends.” In another novel (perhaps including the novel that *Great Expectations* seems to be on first reading), the communicative mishaps between a blinkered lawyer and a young child might be laugh-out-loud funny. In this scene, the irony is sharpened by a reminder of lifelong regret.

Rereaders of twist narratives thus experience a peculiar (because fictional, because harmless) instance of the “uncanny trauma” Paul Saint-Amour describes anticipations of wartime bombing producing in civilians: “a future event becomes a force in the present, producing effects in advance of its arrival,” and leading to a “blurring of the line between anticipation and event, such that anticipation delivers some of the payload — in violence, or recognition, or both — of a

²²₀ Dickens, p. 128.
still-future occurrence.” Rereaders pull some of the pain of the narrative’s future back into the narrative present, transforming ostensibly innocent moments into a calm before the storm.

2.1.2 Miss Havisham Deceives Pip and Sarah Pocket (Irony II)

The next scene I turn to is Pip’s leave-taking of Miss Havisham. It follows fairly closely on this scene with Jaggers, and in it disillusioned ironizers can recognize another character – Miss Havisham – deliberately reinforcing the illusion Pip is under, while not fully understanding the situation herself.

When Pip goes to visit Miss Havisham, he is met at the gate by Sarah Pocket, one of the relatives Miss Havisham hates, and who are all eager for her money. Once in Miss Havisham’s presence, readers are reminded of Jaggers’s evasive speaking style, as well as the specific prohibition on Pip alluding to the identity of his benefactor in any way, as Pip notes that “I was exceedingly careful what I said.” The young Pip takes such care because he believes he is there to express how “grateful” he is to Miss Havisham without naming her directly, but a disillusioned ironizer can readily flesh out the statement differently: “I was exceedingly careful


222 While I wouldn’t argue that all anticipations engaged in by rereaders of twist narratives are traumatic, I take my pre-history of the plot twist to share Saint-Amour’s project to “take seriously the historicity of anticipation.” (Saint-Amour, p. 20.)

My account of disillusioned ironizing also takes inspiration from his discussion of the *renvois* (cross-references) in Diderot and d’Alembert’s encyclopaedia as both “the very stuff of the work’s internal coherence” and also an acknowledgment that any given entry’s content “may turn out to be errors or prejudices that some future editor will need to overthrow.” (Saint-Amour, pp. 195, 196.) Disillusioned ironizers, we might say, append to characters’ errors their own *renvois* to a future time when the truth will be known.
what I said” {believing the prohibition on inquiring after my benefactor’s identity to come from her, when in reality it came from Magwitch}.223

Miss Havisham, having heard of the prohibition from Jaggers, takes advantage of it to torture Sarah Pocket. She doesn’t need to know who Pip’s actual benefactor is because she knows nobody will contradict or question her. Her questions perform a knowingness intended to imply to Sarah, and only incidentally to Pip, a direct involvement with Pip’s great expectations. Pip’s answers, in turn, show gratitude and obedience to the woman he believes to be his benefactor:

“I have seen Mr. Jaggers. I have heard about it, Pip. So you go to-morrow?” {She stressed the word “I” to hint misleadingly at her direct involvement, and trusted that her listeners (both myself and Sarah Pocket) would take “heard” to be a deliberate understatement. Only later would I learn how little involvement Miss Havisham had had, how all of her knowledge really did come from hearsay.} “Yes, Miss Havisham.”

“And you are adopted by a rich person?” {Jaggers had no doubt used the same vague language as he had with me to refer to my benefactor when telling Miss Havisham the news, and she had seen the advantage of adopting it herself.} “Yes, Miss Havisham.”

“Not named?” {The questions themselves demonstrated that Miss Havisham already knew the answers, but this strange catechism gave my visit an air of solemnity that both Sarah Pocket and I took to imply Miss Havisham’s direct involvement in the business.} “No, Miss Havisham.” {While leaving my benefactor technically unnamed, I took an ironic pleasure in mentioning Miss Havisham’s name as close to the topic as I could.} “And Mr. Jaggers is made your guardian?” {Since Sarah and I had only ever encountered Jaggers as Miss Havisham’s lawyer, she could easily predict the inferences we would make.} “Yes, Miss Havisham.”224

223 Dickens, p. 143.

224 Dickens, p. 143.
As with Jaggers’s superior knowledge in the previous scene discussed, Miss Havisham here knows more than the other characters in the scene, and disillusioned ironizers align with her in a position of newly accessible dramatic irony.

The exchange just quoted is bookended by mentions of Miss Havisham “looking at the discomfited and envious Sarah, with delight” and “gloat[ing] on these questions and answers, so keen was her enjoyment of Sarah Pocket’s jealous dismay.” Even first-time readers can readily infer why Sarah is “envious” and “jealous”: she believes Pip is inheriting the fortune she covets. First-time readers may even note Miss Havisham’s deliberate and malicious goading of Sarah’s jealousy. All this may seem rather comical: we dislike sour, hypocritical, money-grubbing Sarah Pocket, and so Pip inheriting Miss Havisham’s fortune feels doubly satisfying (and why shouldn’t Miss Havisham have a little bit of mean-spirited fun with such a self-serving relative?).

The comedic value of the scene is more muted for disillusioned ironizers. While this scene doesn’t explicitly evoke future life regrets like the earlier scene with Jaggers, it does foreground Miss Havisham’s cruelty and lack of consideration for Pip. The entire illusion of the scene, after all, is a deliberate contrivance by Miss Havisham with the goal of punishing Sarah: to that end, she has no scruples in establishing a pretense that will mislead a boy for the best part of a decade. While playing the benevolent “fairy godmother,” a phrase Pip’s narration, focalized through his younger self, uses twice in this scene, Miss Havisham’s real feelings for Pip are absolute indifference.

225 Dickens, p. 143.

226 Dickens, pp. 143, 144.
For disillusioned ironizers, the irony of this scene may have an additional sting in prompting memories of our former selves. Like Pip, we were able to perceive from the start that Miss Havisham was disproportionately concerned with Sarah Pocket’s reactions throughout the scene, yet didn’t consider that this might be Miss Havisham’s true motivation. This is disillusioned ironizing where the “dis-” painfully evokes an earlier “illusioned” understanding, both our own and the character’s over whom we now have a feeling of ironic superiority.

2.1.3 Pip’s “Chance Company” (Irony III)

The next scene I turn to is unusual among the scenes I discuss in not involving Miss Havisham or any other characters related to her – indeed besides Pip it doesn’t involve any named characters at all. Pip, now a young man, is asked by Miss Havisham to come and visit her. The coach he takes there is also transporting two convicts, one of whom happens to be a man Pip had encountered in his childhood, and who had given him two pound notes from Magwitch. During the coach ride Pip overhears him tell the other convict how Magwitch commissioned him to deliver the money. Although Pip is anxious about the convict recognizing him, the ride passes uneventfully.

Even before he recognizes the man, Pip is disturbed to learn that there will be “two convicts going down with [him]” in the coach, explaining that “I had a reason that was an old reason now, for constitutionally faltering whenever I heard the word convict.” *(Little did I know, my faltering was on this occasion justified: one of the convicts accompanying me would be the very man who could connect me to Magwitch, the original source of my anxiety about convicts.)*

A long paragraph follows in which the convict and his companion are described in detail, but his identity is withheld until the final two sentences: “I knew his half-closed eye at one glance. There stood the man whom I had seen on the settle at the Three Jolly Bargemen on a
Saturday night.” Unusually for this novel, where first-time readers are typically aligned with young Pip’s knowledge, and disillusioned ironizers know more than both, here rereaders are aligned with young Pip, who withholds from first-time readers the recognition which occurred “at one glance.” First-time readers are quickly brought up to speed, but this atypical moment of misalignment sets the tone for this scene as one of near-misses and unexpected coincidences.

For both first-time readers and rereaders, dramatic irony settles quickly on the convict, who does not recognize Pip (“he knew me no more than if he had never seen me in his life”). Yet first-time readers and rereaders diverge in their (lack of) knowledge of how the scene will play out. First-time readers, like young Pip, are in a state of suspense: will the convict come to recognize Pip? will he reveal Pip’s shameful connection to Magwitch? Rereaders, in contrast, may remember that this scene ends without mutual recognition – or at least they may vaguely recall this scene as uneventful in the novel’s overall plot. Rereaders’ irony therefore centers on Pip’s anxiety, which we know to be misplaced.

A near-miss involves not merely the absence of collision but also a startlingly close proximity. Disillusioned ironizers, knowing that the convict will not make direct contact with Pip again, can enjoy seeing how close they come. This is made palpably literal in their physical proximity during the coach ride: by chance, the convict sits directly “behind [Pip] with his breath on the hair of [his] head.” The proximity is further heightened in Pip’s perception, feeling the convict’s breathing “not only on the back of my head, but all along my spine. The sensation was

227 Dickens, p. 207.
228 Dickens, p. 207.
229 Dickens, p. 208.
like being touched in the marrow.” As the ride proceeds, Pip is able to overhear the convicts’ conversation only because they move “closer to [him] than before,” “Cowering forward for warmth and to make [Pip] a screen against the wind.” In this state of tense proximity, Pip worries about being recognized, while rereaders know he won’t be.

The overheard conversation is the point of the scene, at least as far as setup for the plot twist is concerned. The convict reminisces how Magwitch asked him to “find out that boy that had fed him and kep his secret, and give him them two one pound notes.” (Little did I know, the two pound notes were only the start of the fortune Magwitch was now transferring to me.) For first-time readers this functioned as a misdirecting frame, suggesting that Magwitch had already repaid Pip for his kindness as far as his means allowed. Disillusioned ironizers can instead detect a poignant note in his desire to reward Pip for his kindness, a desire that only grew with time and as Magwitch grew richer.

The strange pileup of coincidences that brought Pip and the convict into such close proximity makes Pip anxious for as long as he remains on the coach: “the coincidence of our being together on the coach, was sufficiently strange to fill me with a dread that some other coincidence might at any moment connect me, in his hearing, with my name.” Fortunately, Pip is able to leave the coach undetected. However, his dread does not dissipate:

I could not have said what I was afraid of, for my fear was altogether undefined and vague, but there was great fear upon me. As I walked on to the hotel, I felt that a

230 Dickens, p. 209.
231 Dickens, p. 209.
232 Dickens, p. 209.
dread, much exceeding the mere apprehension of a painful or disagreeable recognition, made me tremble. I am confident that it took no distinctness of shape, and that it was the revival for a few minutes of the terror of childhood.234

Unlike the dramatic irony that rereaders have been able to perceive in Pip’s suspense throughout the scene, this concluding moment is harder to make sense of. Pip is no longer in suspense, and yet he rightly recognizes that something significant has just happened which he can’t yet explain. He becomes faintly aware of an unknown unknown: something connected to “the terror of [his] childhood,” but which is not yet past – indeed, has not yet reached fruition. From the perspective of disillusioned ironizers, Pip’s vague dread here is a premonition of the plot twist to come. He is more right than he can possibly know. It’s a strange coincidence to end a scene characterized by strange coincidences. It’s perhaps briefly eerie for disillusioned ironizers that they themselves don’t know what kind “Little did I know…” statement to insert here.

2.1.4 Jaggers Sees Through the “Poor Riddles” (Irony IV)

The final scene I discuss in this section is Pip’s first return to visit Miss Havisham as an adult. In bringing together Pip with Miss Havisham and Jaggers, the scene echoes, and in some moments directly replicates, dramatic ironies from the first two scenes I’ve discussed. Yet it also offers more to the disillusioned ironizer: some dramatic irony which anticipates not disappointment or regret but, perhaps, the glimmer of a happy ending.

This scene is significantly longer than those discussed so far, developing and interweaving multiple plotlines besides the twist concerning Pip’s benefactor. In my analysis I focus on moments that evoke dramatic irony based on knowledge of this twist, though it bears

mentioning that the scene also generates substantial dramatic irony concerning another twist: that Estella is the daughter of Magwitch and Jaggers’s maid Molly (cf. Pip’s repeated question to himself “What was it?” while observing Estella). Jaggers in fact is a point of connection between these two twists, since he is the only character in the novel with direct knowledge of both. As in the first scene discussed, therefore, he is the figure with whose knowledge disillusioned ironizers align in perceiving the scene’s numerous dramatic ironies.

The scene begins with an explicit reminder of Pip’s previous visit to Miss Havisham, when he is met once again by Sarah Pocket “who appeared to have now become constitutionally green and yellow by reason of me.” Like Pip, she is still under the same illusion about Miss Havisham being’s Pip benefactor, and her envy has only intensified. While disillusioned ironizers may feel pity for Pip, they may relish a crueller enjoyment at Sarah’s expense. All her mentions throughout the scene reinforce this cruel joke: later, at dinner, Pip the narrator describes her as “my green and yellow friend,” and Jaggers “[takes] a dry delight in making Sarah Pocket greener and yellower, by often referring in conversation with me to my expectations.”

After being led to Miss Havisham, Pip is reintroduced to Estella, now grown up and even more beautiful, and the two go for a walk around the grounds of the house. Besides the question of Estella’s parentage, she contributes to the dramatic irony concerning Pip’s benefactor in that

235 Dickens, pp. 217–18.
236 Dickens, p. 214.
237 Dickens, p. 221.
Pip (and perhaps Estella herself) believes Miss Havisham is making Pip into a gentleman in order to make him a match for Estella:

I […] regarded myself as eliciting [Estella’s “air of completeness and superiority”] by being so set apart for her and assigned to her.238 (Perhaps this really was the reason for her haughtiness, though neither of us knew that Miss Havisham had no intention to have us married.)

As they walk, Pip and Estella reminisce about the past, and discuss Estella’s feelings (or lack thereof). Throughout the conversation, Estella’s

air of inaccessibility […] tormented me in the midst of my delight, and at the height of the assurance I felt that our patroness had chosen us for one another. Wretched boy!239 [Little did I know, the assurance I felt was a mere feeling, and Miss Havisham had chosen Estella for me only to make me suffer.]

Beyond generating dramatic irony for disillusioned ironizers, this interaction with Estella sets up a misdirection for first-time readers as to the “point” of this entire episode: it suggests that the unresolved narrative problem of the episode is whether Estella will eventually consent to be matched with Pip. In more abstract terms, first-time readers may wonder: can an arranged marriage ever be happy? Disillusioned ironizers, in contrast, know that no marriage has been arranged, and for them the point of the episode is to demonstrate how Pip’s illusions are reinforced by those around him.

After his walk with Estella, Pip returns inside to talk alone with Miss Havisham. She asks how Pip feels about Estella, and swiftly launches into an exhortation to:

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238 Dickens, p. 217.

239 Dickens, p. 218.
“Love her, love her, love her! If she favours you, love her. If she wounds you, love her. If she tears your heart to pieces – and as it gets older and stronger, it will tear deeper – love her, love her, love her!”

The narrator notes Miss Havisham’s “passionate eagerness” as she speaks, which for first-time readers may reinforce the belief that she intends a match between Pip and Estella. Yet even in this first utterance, disillusioned ironizers may mentally rewrite “If she tears your heart to pieces” with *When*, and emphasise the “will” in “will tear deeper”.

Some rereaders may even recall Miss Havisham’s previous whispered commands to Estella, which Pip overheard: “You can break his heart” and “Break their hearts my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!” And of course, rereaders may also remember *forwards* to a passage from their first reading, once the twist is revealed, in which Pip reflects back on precisely these present misunderstandings:

Miss Havisham’s intentions towards me, all a mere dream; Estella not designed for me; I only suffered in Satis House as a convenience, a sting for the greedy relations, a model with a mechanical heart to practise on when no other practice was at hand;

When Miss Havisham talks eagerly of matters of the “heart”, disillusioned ironizers can read *heartbreak* between the lines, knowing that’s what she has in mind.

With all these verbal associations available to disillusioned ironizers from Miss Havisham’s first utterance in this scene, it’s remarkable how plainly the novel presents her malicious intentions not only between the lines but in the text itself. The narrator states that “if the often repeated word had been hate instead of love – despair – revenge – dire death – it could

240 Dickens, p. 219.
241 Dickens, pp. 54, 87.
242 Dickens, p. 295.
not have sounded from her lips more like a curse,” and Miss Havisham goes on to define “real love” as “blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter – as I did!”243 First-time readers have more than enough hints that Miss Havisham simply wants to re-enact her own heartbreak in the next generation, though with the reversal that her younger stand-in will be the heartbreaker, not heartbroken. It’s only the belief that Miss Havisham will bequeath her property to Pip that insulates her for first-time readers and for Pip with an aura of benevolence. Disillusioned ironizers can only marvel at how thinly (yet effectively) disguised Miss Havisham’s cruel intentions are.

Jaggers enters the room, interrupting Miss Havisham and Pip’s tête-à-tête. His presence throughout the remainder of this episode offers a new point of identification for disillusioned ironizers. He is, after all, the only person who not only knows who Pip’s real benefactor is but also understands Miss Havisham’s deceptive intentions (not to mention also knowing the secret of Estella’s parentage). As noted above, he continues Miss Havisham’s work by goading Sarah Pocket about Pip’s great expectations. Nonetheless, “he showed no consciousness, and even made it appear that he extorted – and even did extort, though I don’t know how – those references out of my innocent self.”244 Disillusioned ironizers may feel an affinity with Jaggers, as he observes the other characters in the scene torturing themselves and each other with what only he knows to be illusions. Similarly, when alone with Pip after dinner, Jaggers “[sits] with an air upon him of general lying by in consequence of information he possessed, that really was too

243 Dickens, p. 219.

244 Dickens, p. 221.
much for me,” and later when Jaggers plays cards with with Miss Havisham, Pip and Estella, Pip has a “feeling” of Jaggers “looking upon us personally in the light of three very obvious and poor riddles that he had found out long ago.”\textsuperscript{245} \textit{(Little did we know the secrets about us that Jaggers had long ago found out.)} For first-time readers this is tantalizing, though they may suspect Jaggers simply knows more about Miss Havisham’s matchmaking designs for Pip and Estella. Disillusioned ironizers, on the other hand, can imagine that a narration of this scene focalized through Jaggers would offer the same readings between the lines that they themselves are supplying.

The chapter ends by reinforcing the episode’s primary misdirecting frame: Estella-resents-arranged-marriage-with-Pip.

Far into the night, Miss Havisham’s words, “Love her, love her, love her!” sounded in my ears. \textit{(I had already forgotten her subsequent words about heartbreak, humiliation and suffering, and my own sense that her words were not a blessing but a curse.)} I adapted them for my own repetition, and said to my pillow, “I love her, I love her, I love her!” hundreds of times. \textit{(Miss Havisham would no doubt have been pleased to know I was working to increase my heartbreak to come.)} Then, a burst of gratitude came upon me, \textit{(as I erroneously believed)} that she should be destined for me, once the blacksmith’s boy. Then, I thought if she were, as I feared, by no means rapturously grateful for that destiny yet, when would she begin to be interested in me? When should I awaken the heart within her, that was mute and sleeping now?\textsuperscript{246}

There’s plenty of dramatic irony towards Pip to be found in this paragraph, and as such the episode concludes in the style to which disillusioned ironizers have become accustomed.

But the final few sentences of this last paragraph might give rereaders pause for thought as they think ahead to the novel’s ending. Though neither of the novel’s two endings concludes

\textsuperscript{245} Dickens, pp. 221, 222.

\textsuperscript{246} Dickens, p. 223.
with Estella rapturously in love with Pip, they do both emphasize that she has experienced a profound change of “heart.” In the second, more optimistic ending, Estella tells Pip that she has given “remembrance” of him and his love “a place in [her] heart.”247 The first, more muted ending, in which Pip and Estella have a brief, chance meeting in London, also dedicates its final sentence to Estella’s heart, with Pip glad for the “assurance, that suffering […] had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be.”248

Despite the various layers of dramatic irony Pip is under as he reflects on Miss Havisham’s command to “love” Estella, he nonetheless anticipates one part of the plot with exceptional accuracy. Rereaders, for once, don’t know more than Pip does now, since the novel ends inconclusively, leaving open the possibility of a reconciliation between Pip and Estella without confirming either way. His “heart” may go on, even if the novel doesn’t. The chapter’s end is a pressure-release valve against the build up of too much dramatic irony, reminding disillusioned ironizers that despite knowing more than the characters about the events to come, they don’t know everything.

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“Disillusioned” is a tricky descriptor because it conflates an epistemic-perceptual and an affective stance. To say a person has become “disillusioned about love” connotes more than just a feeling (as words like “bitter” or “cynical” do), implying also that love is, in fact, an “illusion.” And yet in everyday speech, people do use “disillusioned” as a straightforward affective term

247 Dickens, p. 442.

248 Dickens, p. 444.
without it entailing any truth value. On the other hand, if we take “disillusioned” as simply “dis” + “illusioned” we can use it to describe a range of experiences in which illusions fall away, which don’t necessarily involve bitterness, cynicism, etc. Discovering that the train you’re in is stationary, when you believed it to be moving because of another train moving past the window, can be called disillusionment, but is at most mildly disconcerting, and perhaps even funny.

I say all this because in *Great Expectations* disillusioned ironizing does for me involve disillusionment in both the epistemic-perceptual and affective senses. The dramatic irony that I experienced relative to the characters had a bitter flavor. The feelings of knowingness in rereading this novel were tinged with regret, gloom, despair, hopelessness. But my purpose in rereading the scenes above with disillusioned irony has been to trace how even within this generally pessimistic rereading experience there are brief flickers of other affects: curiosity, pleasure (perhaps a cruel pleasure, but pleasure nonetheless), a softening of the heart. Other rereaders might feel very differently while going through very similar perceptual-epistemic processes.

I move now from *Great Expectations* in particular to a general account of disillusioned ironizing in relation to plot twists. At its core, disillusioned ironizing need only involve epistemic-perceptual disillusionment. Disillusioned ironizing might feel very different when rereading *Emma*, for example, where the all-round happy endings and satisfying romantic pairings might produce a benevolent optimism towards the characters. Yes, things seem confusing and frustrating now, but you have such good things to come! We can also think of the complicated affects rereaders may experience in relation to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Heinrich von Kleist’s “The Marquise of O...,” where an ostensibly happy ending of love and marriage is undercut by the imprisonment and death of a Creole woman in the first case and the
rape of an unconscious woman in the second. Disillusioned ironizing can make readers feel many different ways, but in all cases the feelings will be fuelled by the readers’ own misunderstanding followed by eventual clarification.

Disillusioned ironizing as I define it involves a diegetic focus. Although it involves dissolving certain prior illusions, it does not go so far as to dissolve the illusion of the novel’s entire fictional universe. On the contrary, disillusioned ironizers are all the more invested in the fictional truths of the narrative in question, reading now with a firm sense of what’s real and what’s illusory which wasn’t possible on their first reading. They continue to engage in what Kendall Walton has called “Mimesis as Make-Believe.”249 Disillusioned ironizers remain immersed in the novel’s world, with the difference that they are now reading, as it were, a novel with omniscient narration – supplied by readers themselves between the lines of what’s there on the page. These virtual narratorial insertions of the form {Little did I know...} don’t fundamentally disturb the novel’s diegetic coherence – in fact, they strengthen it.

Tentatively, I offer some generalizations about features of a twist narrative which invite these disillusioned insertions.

1. **Details relevant to the twist**, whether presented to first-time readers as trivial or as important but within a misdirecting frame. What counts as a detail relevant to any given narrative’s twist will largely be *sui generis*. That said, useful taxonomies based on twist sub-types would probably be possible (e.g. for twists concerning concealed parentage, relevant details often include descriptions of characters’ physical appearance, voice or manner).

2. **Future-oriented statements** of all kinds may also invite disillusioned ironizing, whether proleptic hints by a narrator, or characters expressing wishes, desires, speculations and

expectations (which in a twist narrative will either fail to come true, or come true differently from how the character had hoped).  

3. **References to the past**, too, can invite disillusioned ironizing, less because characters or narrators misunderstand the past (they may, they may not) than because retrospection takes on the quality of dramatic irony in twist narratives, where rereaders know that more intense, ironic retrospection is still to come.

4. **Reflections on topics like misunderstanding, ignorance, known unknowns vs unknown unknowns, etc.**, by characters or by narrators, have thematic resonance with the twist, and thus invite dramatic irony, particularly when characters believe their reflections will protect them from misunderstandings and unforeseen surprises. Of course, features such as speculation, retrospection and reflection on misunderstanding are by no means unique to twist narratives but common in all kinds of novels. It could hardly be otherwise: writers of twist narratives must choose features that they can pass off as ordinary novel features, otherwise the twist would be spoiled.

   Disillusioned ironizing shares an important feature with rereading in general: namely, that readers are no longer assessing narrative events in terms of probability. First-time readers, who don’t know where the plot is going, do typically assess the events of a novel in terms of probability: how likely or unlikely is this thing happening now? What might the likely (and less likely) ramifications be? Is this thing even possible? Probabilist aesthetics were especially influential in theories of the novel (and the novella) from the later eighteenth through the nineteenth century, sometimes valuing a sweet spot between too probable (boring) and too improbable (unconvincing), at other times valuing the seemingly highly improbable yet nonetheless possible.

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250 This holds true even with non-chronological twist narratives such as *Memento*, where the main character looks forward to avenging his wife’s murder, not knowing (because he has amnesia) that he has already done so.

251 While probabilist novel aesthetics led to some tedious critical gatekeeping in the nineteenth century, it is nonetheless interesting as implicitly presupposing first-time reading. This is worth taking seriously, especially as many readers today have lost a sense that there ever **could** be a first reading of these nineteenth-century novels, which come with so much canonical baggage that they can’t really be experienced probabilistically any more. We’re very aware the events were set in stone a long time ago, even if we don’t already know the plot.
Such calculations change drastically on rereading: what’s probable or possible within the plot is no longer a live question for rereaders, who know what is, was and will be. Instead, rereaders assess events through a process which the psychologist Walter Kintsch called “postdiction.” Kintsch describes postdiction thus: “After the fact, once the reader has absorbed the unpredictable, he must be able to look back and explain to himself how it all fits together. In a story, he must be able to perceive a motivation for the events.” You could think of postdiction as in fact assessing the predictability of events, after the fact, knowing what the outcomes have been. Whether or not I personally predicted the plot’s events, was it predictable? Kintsch coined the term to explain what motivates people to read for “entertainment,” or more prosaically “why anyone would read a story anyway.” Readers don’t want a narrative to be predictable, but they do want to be able to perceive the causal coherence of the events depicted: in other words, they want a narrative to be postdictable. Thus they assess the narrative for postdictability not only once they’ve finished reading it but also while reading, judging whether each new scene “has its place and is meaningfully related to other sections of the text.” There should not be too much chance or contrivance, there should not be a *deus ex machina*, there should not be loose ends or unfinished storylines.


253 Kintsch, p. 89.

254 Cf. Howard Mumford Jones ‘On Rereading Great Expectations,’ *Southwest Review*, 39.4 (1954), 328–335, 328. The author judges a minor flaw of the novel to be the fact that “no later use is made of Herbert’s father’s family” after their first appearance, and speculates that “Perhaps Dickens once intended to integrate this family more closely with the plot.”
In Kintsch’s account, assessments of postdictability primarily occur during and after the first reading. I believe postdictability can also help answer the related question: why would anyone reread a story anyway? I want to suggest that judgments of postdictability take on a new life during a rereading, and especially during the rereading of a twist narrative. At this point, readers have the events of the narrative both behind them (from their first reading in the past) but also ahead (they haven’t yet happened for the characters, nor on this rereading). If Kintsch is right that judgments of postdictability are a spur to (keep on) reading, then this spur is given a particular kick when experienced not just in retrospect, once you’ve put the book down, but while reliving the narrative in question. In the case of Great Expectations, rereaders might not want the disappointing outcomes for Pip, but their high postdictability might make readers want to follow events through to the bitter end, and gives a feeling of satisfaction somewhat distinct from the plot’s content.

Yet rereaders’ judgments of postdictability needn’t only concern the reality behind the characters’ illusions. Painful as it can be to witness the characters’ mistakes and misunderstandings, the characters falling under and perpetuating specific illusions are also events that for rereaders are a given. The illusions can’t be thought of in terms of possibility or probability: they happened, so they are now necessary (in the philosophical sense). A good plot twist – and Great Expectations does this very well – makes not only the revelation of reality but also the string of misdirecting illusions seem highly postdictable. Characters’ misguided

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speculations are real and narratively consequential, even if the situations they envisioned were never actually possible.

Disillusioned ironizing is one satisfying way to engage with a twist narrative second time round. Without leaving the world of the characters and the events in their lives, disillusioned ironizers nonetheless bring distinctive knowledge and distinctive understanding to the events, which result in a distinctive reading experience and distinctive pleasures as well as, sometimes, pains.

I’ve shown the complex cognition that disillusioned ironizing involves, and briefly sketched the varied affects it can produce. Cognition and affect are intertwined, but not in same way for all readers. Nonetheless the range of responses is relatively constrained, especially on the cognitive level, since they involve adding to, rather than completely rewriting, the existing text. As such, while different readers may engage in disillusioned ironizing at different points in the same story, and may feel differently about it, they should be able to share these moments and recognize others as engaging in the same procedure, even if they pick up on different points. As in a bowling alley, there are many routes to hitting the pins, but also clearly defined gutters beyond which you’re no longer in the same game as others.

2.2 Vicarious Crafting

Disillusioned ironizing is not the only way to reread a twist narrative. I now turn to what I call vicarious crafting as a second mode with particular relevance to rereading twists.

As the name suggests, vicarious crafting focuses on the work that crafted the twist in the first place. Whereas disillusioned ironizing involves recognizing illusions as illusions, seeing through them and noticing how and why the characters fail to do so, vicarious crafting turns
readers’ attention to how these illusions were made. By this I mean something more than simply noting or appreciating the skill with which a literary object is made, as you might admire the stitching of a garment.256 This mode of appraisal is characterized by readers remaining separate, at a critical distance, from the work read. As the word “vicarious” suggests, vicarious crafting involves readers in a more intimate act of re-living, re-experiencing how the work came to be.

When you engage in vicarious crafting, you mentally go through the motions of how the work of art in question was made. Or, phrased slightly more cautiously, you mentally reconstruct processes that might have led to the creation of the work as it is. I once read the claim that when we are listening intently to a singer, we involuntarily and perhaps unconsciously replicate some of the movements of the singer’s lungs, throat and mouth. This too might be called vicarious crafting in the medium of singing. The vicarious crafting in Great Expectations is less physiological: we’re not moving our hand across a page as Dickens once did, but we are doing some of the thinking he might have done.257

256 I allude here to Russian Formalist Boris Eikhenbaum’s “How Gogol’s Overcoat Was Made,” also translated as “How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ Is Made.” This is an early example of what has become a long tradition of inquiries by literary scholars framed as questions of “how it’s made.” As the slippage between “is made” and “was made” suggests, it’s not always clear whether such scholarship is an immanent study of textual structure (structuralist pole) or a reconstruction of the writing process (genetic pole).

257 If this is setting off alarm bells around authorial intention (“intentional fallacy,” “death of the author,” etc.) I want to be clear that the flesh-and-blood author’s intentions don’t directly matter to readers’ experience of vicarious crafting: it matters only that the mental processes readers engage in could have led to the specific features in the work in front of them. That said, a brief look at most procedurally generated literature suggests that it’s hard for texts to sustain an attitude of vicarious crafting unless they were, in fact, intentionally and skilfully made. A rich, challenging case study would be Raymond Queneau’s Cent mille milliards de poèmes, which combines procedurality with intentionality (not to mention reader agency).
In this section I focus on vicarious crafting as it relates to the twist of *Great Expectations*.\(^{258}\) Where the previous section on disillusioned reading maintained a diegetic focus on characters, events, illusions and truths within the novel, here the focus is extra-diegetic: on the novel as a fictional text created by a writer.

### 2.2.1 Dickens Establishes Jaggers (Craft I)

I begin my account where I began the previous account of disillusioned ironizing. One night at the pub in the local village, a “stranger” asks after “an apprentice [...] commonly known as Pip”.

> The stranger did not recognise me, and I didn’t recognise him either / but I recognised him as a lawyer serving many people in my town and beyond but I recognised him as the gentleman I had met on the stairs, on the occasion of my second visit to Miss Havisham.\(^{259}\)

Vicariously crafting readers will recall, or can flip back to verify, that the novel did depict Pip encountering Jaggers on his second visit to Miss Havisham. Dickens could have managed this many different ways: he could have alluded to a previously undepicted event (“I recalled I had met him on a visit to Miss Havisham’s which I have not seen fit to recount”), he could have had Jaggers make a chance appearance at Miss Havisham’s *after* first telling Pip of his anonymous benefactor, he could (at the strong risk of spoiling the twist) have introduced Jaggers representing Magwitch, or any of his criminal clients Pip will later meet when he goes to

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\(^{258}\) Vicarious crafting can also occur during first readings. When reading Dickens novels, for example, I often experience vicarious crafting in relation to the minor characters, and how their catchphrases are deployed at carefully calibrated intervals (initially frequent; later less frequent).

Nor is vicarious crafting limited to the crafting of illusions. I experience strong vicarious crafting when I encounter Byron’s extravagant multi-word rhymes (“Her thoughts were theorems, her words a problem, / As if she deem’d that mystery would ennoble ’em.” (Lord Byron, *The Major Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 381.)).

\(^{259}\) Dickens, p. 124.
London. But Dickens did none of these things, which is why I represent them as struck through, as thinkable but unrealized possibilities. Instead, by first introducing Jaggers in connection only with Miss Havisham, a misdirecting frame is formed in advance of when it begins to misdirect.

Vicarious crafters might even go on to reflect that Dickens had many options besides making Jaggers the legal representative of both Magwitch and Miss Havisham: he could have been a lawyer to several local people Pip knows, or simply a lawyer from London unconnected with Miss Havisham, but who Pip assumes she must have hired. The choice Dickens made, once again, is particularly effective at setting up the twist.

And yet the craft of the setup is also detectable in the quieter hints that point to Magwitch in this scene: before Jaggers even speaks to Pip, there is a comical set-piece in which he cross-examines Wopsle for “having pronounced a fellow-creature guilty, unheard.” Wopsle has been giving a dramatic reading of a news report on a trial in which the defence has not yet been heard, but Jaggers’s response hints not only at his knowledge of criminal trials (not relevant to his work for the genteel Miss Havisham), but also his investment in defending people against apparently damning evidence. This set-piece could have been different in many of these details, or could not have been at all. Yet even as the scene overall misdirects readers about Jaggers’s affiliations, it sets up a hint of the twist to come.

From the perspective of a vicarious crafter, Jaggers’s vague, evasive legalese, whose double meanings disillusioned ironizers could enjoy noticing, is a strategic contrivance of Dickens’s. Not all lawyers speak this way – Jaggers’s own associate Wemmick doesn’t, for

260 Dickens, p. 123.
example. But giving Jaggers’s these characteristic speech patterns sidesteps a potential problem of motivation: Jaggers has no reason to want to deceive Pip, and indeed, as noted above, he may not initially anticipate Pip’s inference that Miss Havisham is his benefactor. But because he always speaks with deliberate vagueness, the illusion is initiated without being intended. As such, whereas disillusioned ironizers can appreciate the unintentional irony in each of Jaggers’s vague or ambiguous wordings, vicarious crafters can detect in these same words Dickens’s intentional craft.

2.2.2 Dickens Makes Miss Havisham a “Fairy Godmother” (Craft II)

Pip’s leave-taking of Miss Havisham, which follows shortly thereafter, similarly offers elements of craft for rereaders to experience vicariously. Before Pip even meets with Miss Havisham, he re-encounters Sarah Pocket, who will motivate Miss Havisham’s deception throughout the scene. Yet, as with Jaggers, Sarah is not simply dropped in to misdirect from the twist: her relevant characteristics are set up well before they’re needed. This marks Pip’s third encounter with Sarah, and her dislike of Pip is already well established. At their first encounter she “look[s] at [Pip] with the utmost contempt,” and is described by the narrator as “a blandly vicious personage” and as having “artful slipperiness.” On her second, briefer, appearance, Sarah acts as an unwelcoming gatekeeper to Miss Havisham (“How, then? You here again?” said Miss Pocket. “What do you want?”).

As such, readers are reminded of her hostility to Pip when Sarah Pocket “[comes] to the gate, and positively reel[s] back when she [sees] [Pip] so changed,” now dressed in tailored

261 Dickens, pp. 74, 79, 80.

262 Dickens, p. 105.
clothes paid for by his benefactor. In this first moment, her face already turns “green and yellow,” which will soon be explicitly associated with her envy and resentment of Pip’s apparent status as Miss Havisham’s heir.263 “You?” she says, “You, good gracious! What do you want?”,264 echoing her own previous gatekeeping question, but with “good gracious” registering a new awareness of Pip, who she had previously treated as unworthy of attention. She may not yet have made the connection to Miss Havisham, but the competitiveness readers have seen in her earlier jockeying with her relative Camilla now redirects towards Pip.

All this crafting of Sarah in earlier scenes and at the start of this one represent Dickens’s choices among many other possibilities: Sarah might not have had such a jealous, competitive character; she might not have been present in Pip’s earlier visits to Miss Havisham; there needn’t have been a Sarah Pocket at all. But the precise choices Dickens made, even if they themselves are contrivances, allow the scene in question to play out without apparent contrivance.

Pip’s conversation with Miss Havisham, which earlier I analyzed in terms of dramatic ironies arising from the various characters’ knowledge or lack thereof, can also be examined from the perspective of writing craft. Whereas disillusioned ironizers can insert all kinds of omniscient narration between the lines of their speech, vicarious crafters can appreciate the formal restraint of Dickens’s catechistic back-and-forth:

“[…] So you go to-morrow?”
“Yes, Miss Havisham.”

263 Dickens, p. 142.
264 Dickens, p. 143.
“And you are adopted by a rich person?”
“Yes, Miss Havisham.”
“Not named?”
“No, Miss Havisham.”
“And Mr. Jaggers is made your guardian?”
“Yes, Miss Havisham.”

It’s rare in the Dickens universe for characters to speak at length without narratorial intrusion. We could even imagine Dickens pondering but rejecting the addition of further misdirections in between the utterances here: “And you are adopted by a rich person?” She gave a benevolent smile. But instead the rhetorical organization here becomes so palpable that it becomes its own alibi: Dickens can leave unusually large gaps precisely because the minimalist stichomythia can be taken as a stylistic flourish.

Thinking beyond the words before their eyes, vicarious crafters may engage in similar reflections to those I noted in the previous scene about Dickens’s choice to have Jaggers represent both Magwitch and Miss Havisham. In particular, her words “I have seen Mr. Jaggers. I have heard about it” evoke the plot’s dependence on Dickens’s choice to connect the characters through Jaggers. But even distinct from others, Miss Havisham in her own right has been carefully crafted in advance of this scene to help pull off the illusion. When Pip first enters the room, she “mak[es] her crutch stick play round [him], as if she, the fairy godmother who had

265 Dickens, p. 143.
changed [him], were bestowing the finishing gift,” phrasing echoed at the end of the conversation when Pip concludes:

and so I left my fairy godmother, with both her hands on her crutch stick, standing in the midst of the dimly lighted room beside the rotten bride-cake that was hidden in cobwebs.268

The phrase “fairy godmother” hasn’t previously appeared in the novel, but the cobwebbed bride-cake recalls a long-running pattern of imagery that has presented Miss Havisham as eerie, otherworldly, perhaps even supernatural. On the other hand, Miss Havisham has repeatedly used her stick to assert her will and control over others: in earlier scenes she has “struck the table” with it to point out where her family will sit at her funeral, she has used it to silence Pip when he is “going to wish her many happy returns,” she has “stabb[ed]” the air with it, and held it “against her heart” while looking at her faded possessions.269 Both her otherworldliness and her stick contribute to the illusion of this scene: her otherworldliness make it feel plausible that, of all the characters in the novel, Miss Havisham would become Pip’s deus ex machina, but the stick grounds this apparent miracle in her evident pain and even petty desire for control, thus saving the situation from feeling too good to be true. Perhaps, hypothetically, some other bundle of characteristics could be slotted in place of Miss Havisham’s with even greater effectiveness, but it’s hard to imagine; on the other hand, it’s easy enough to imagine the many possible choices that would serve the illusion less well: an even more otherworldly Miss

267 Dickens, p. 143.
268 Dickens, p. 144.
269 Dickens, pp. 80, 81.
Havisham, a meaner Miss Havisham, a more benevolent Miss Havisham, a less whimsical Miss Havisham…

A general contrast: whereas disillusioned ironizers recognize their experience as based on an intensified certainty about what is, in contrast to what seemed possible, probable or actual on a first reading, vicarious crafting infuses What Is with a renewed sense of potentiality, by attending to What Might Have Been.

2.2.3 Dickens Uses Coincidence as Foreshadowing (Craft III)

The third scene I turn to offers especially rich material for reflection, because it so strongly thematizes contingency. Are you surprised that we’re returning to Pip’s coach ride with the nameless convicts?

In the first two scenes discussed, the craft that readers can vicariously reconstruct primarily depended on character traits and narrative sequence. Here, the craft centers instead on downplaying the (diegetic) improbability, or (extra-diegetic) contrivance, of the events. The opening paragraph begins this process by stating that convicts being transported by coach is “customary,” that Pip has “often heard” of the practice and has “more than once” seen it happening. As a result, he has “no cause to be surprised” when he learns of the convicts accompanying the coach that day. Nothing more common, we might think, than this chance conjunction. Even Pip’s oblique reference to having “an old reason” for “faltering whenever [he] hear[s] the word convict” – in other words, the memory of Magwitch – suggests that there is no real connection between him and these convicts, except the fearful fantasies in his mind.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ Dickens, p. 207.
Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world… Of all the convicts customarily transported on coaches, the one and only convict Pip knows is on this coach on this day – it’s a development that may make even a first-time reader wonder about authorial contrivance. Yet rather than attempt to pass off the occurrence as in fact not improbable, Dickens surrounds this scene of strange coincidences with many other counterfactual possibilities. Even if various more probable outcomes don’t occur, what does happen gains greater credibility from being placed among them.

The first counterfactual Dickens introduces is that the convicts might not have been allowed to travel on the same coach after all: a family has taken up “the whole of the back of the coach,” and so there are “no places for the two prisoners but on the seat in front, behind the coachman.” At this point a “choleric gentleman” objects that it’s “a breach of contract to mix him up with such villainous company,” and the convict sarcastically replies “I don’t want to go. I am quite ready to stay behind. As fur as I am concerned any one’s welcome to my place.” The emphasis on the first-person pronouns offer a brief flicker of possibility: he of all people may be forced off the coach with Pip due to seating arrangements.

“At length,” however, presumably after the matter has been hotly debated, it’s decided that the gentleman “must either go in his chance company or remain behind.” The phrase “chance company” here indicates how elegantly Dickens has shifted our probabilistic misgivings about the company Pip finds himself in onto a minor character. Whereas the angry gentleman objects to travelling with any convict, Pip is anxious about by chance finding himself in the company of precisely this one convict. But presented side-by-side, Pip’s concern comes to seem

271 Dickens, p. 208. Italics Dickens’s.
like one of many anecdotes about the inconveniences of travel. Who hasn’t found themselves in undesirable “chance company” of some kind?

After this small streak of bad luck for Pip, Dickens offers a swing back towards “blessed fortune” when Herbert calls him by a nickname “Handel” rather than “Pip”, which the convict might recognize. This, in its way, is just as contrived as the previous unfortunate coincidences: Herbert insisted on a nickname simply because he disliked the name Philip, “for it sounds like a moral boy out of the spelling-book.” My own vicarious crafting leads me to wonder whether Dickens contrived the nickname precisely as setup for this moment at the coach – other than contributing to the general theme of (mis)naming and identity, there’s no other direct payoff to Herbert calling Pip “Handel.” This in turn might make the moment of the coach feel even more contrived, since Herbert could have called any number of things to Pip that didn’t involve naming him at all. Still, because Herbert’s nicknaming leads only to a non-event – Pip’s identity isn’t revealed – it somehow seems less contrived.

As I noted above, the “point” of this scene, from a plot perspective, is not the series of coincidences and counterfactual non-events that put Pip and the convict on the same coach but the conversation Pip overhears between the two convicts en route. Pip’s overhearing is not a given, however, but is presented as only possible because of a further series of improbable events. Firstly, the fact that after the reshuffling of seats due to overcrowding “the convict [Pip] had recognised [sits] behind [him].” Second, the fact that “The weather [is] miserably raw” and “cold,” and there is a “cold damp wind,” which has the convicts “Cowering forward for

272 Dickens, p. 163.

273 Dickens, p. 208.
warmth and to make [Pip] a screen against the wind.”274 If Pip had been in any other seat, or the weather had been milder, he might never have overheard what he hears.

After dozing off in the cold, the very first words that awaken Pip are “Two One Pound notes” – the very items that the convict delivered from Magwitch to Pip years before. What’s remarkable after all this buildup is that the overheard conversation itself is so inconsequential, merely filling in a few details about how Magwitch commissioned the convict at a chance meeting “in the Dockyard,” and that Magwitch was subsequently “tried again for prison breaking, and got made a Lifer,” in other words was deported from the country for life. This of course is misdirection for first-time readers, since the novel has invited them to wonder whether Pip’s sometime association with Magwitch will spoil his rise to gentleman status thanks to Miss Havisham. If he’s a Lifer, these readers may think, there’s no way he can come back to haunt Pip. On the other hand, vicarious crafters can appreciate that before this apparently crucial detail, Dickens slips in hints not only at Magwitch’s gratitude to Pip but his desire to reward him for his kindness: “Would I find out that boy that had fed him and kep his secret, and give him them two one pound notes?”275

All in all, the overheard conversation is presented diegetically as an event which for any number of reasons could easily not have happened. This tiny event is hedged around on all sides by other possible worlds where things went differently. As a matter of plotting craft, this might initially seem counter-intuitive: why foreground a pileup of coincidences that risks looking like contrivance? But the choice makes sense here, where it would perhaps be fatal in one of the

274 Dickens, p. 209.
scenes with Miss Havisham or Jaggers, precisely because the scene proves to be so uneventful. The overheard conversation doesn’t transform Pip’s understanding in any major way, and certainly doesn’t tip him off to the twist to come. As such, vicarious crafters can reflect that this scene might easily have been lifted out of the novel with no harm to its plot. Besides evoking the many counterfactual scenarios where Pip doesn’t overhear the conversation, the scene perhaps also hints at a more eventful outcome: one in which Pip figures out the twist long before Magwitch arrives.

In fact, Pip is less concerned with the content of the convicts’ talk than with the prospect of his identity being revealed:

the coincidence of our being together on the coach, was sufficiently strange to fill me with a dread that some other coincidence might at any moment connect me, in his hearing, with my name.²⁷⁶

And so he slips away, and feels relieved, but perhaps if he’d allowed the coincidences to play out slightly further he might have learned that fleeing the convict won’t allow him to escape his association with Magwitch. That might have been good for Pip, but bad for Dickens in pulling off the twist.

Because this scene evokes so many other possible but unrealized outcomes, it allows vicarious crafters to engage in acts of storytelling that go far beyond the bounds of what’s in the novel. However, this is not to say that vicarious crafters want any of the other outcomes. On the contrary, almost all the other conceivable outcomes – whether they involve Pip not overhearing the conversation, or somehow learning more about Magwitch (the convict could have said “Two
pounds was all he had then, but I heard he got rich in Australia after”) – would contribute less effectively to the twist. Against this counterfactual backdrop, the choices Dickens made come to seem all the more right.

2.2.4 Dickens Draws on the “Here but not Now” (Craft IV)

It should come as no surprise that the final episode I analyze in this section is, once more, Pip’s adult reunion with Miss Havisham, Estella, Jaggers and Sarah Pocket. This episode is one of the most sustained pieces of preparation for the twist, while also itself benefitting from having been extensively prepared for. Indeed, from the perspective of craft, it represents some of the most intricate interconnections to other scenes, both before and after.

The significance of the episode is anchored less in the “here and now” than in the “here but not now.” Both diegetically and extra-diegetically the episode draws attention to itself as a temporal palimpsest: it evokes the traces of earlier events in the same place, while also laying traces on which later episodes can build. For this reason, the vicarious crafting rereaders can engage in centers on acts of planning: how the author planned ahead for this episode, and how this episode reflects plans for later parts of the plot.277

Within the scene, Dickens repeatedly uses short-range and easily noticeable verbal echoes, which hint at longer-range echoes that careful readers might trace. When Pip first arrives, he walks “down the long passage which I had first trodden in my thick boots,” and to reinforce the echo a few paragraphs later Pip ascends the staircase which he had ascended “in the

277 The serial writing and publication format could be an additional dimension of analysis here. Dickens’s notebooks attest to detailed pre-planning of a novel’s entire plot before publication began, but also to changes of mind that happened along the way. Cf. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009).
dark, many a time,” but now “in lighter boots than of yore.”

The emphasis on “boots” and their thickness picks up Estella’s first humiliating assessment of Pip – “what thick boots.”

Indeed, Dickens has already established the judgment as resonating through time by echoing it verbally in several subsequent scenes. Pip’s return to Miss Havisham’s house “in lighter boots” is thus an echo in two senses, both of events in the narrative and of words on the page. And yet this doubly reinforced echo does not imply that nothing has changed: on the contrary, its familiarity serves to highlight that a lot has changed. Remember Pip’s thick boots? Look how far he’s come.

This association between short-range verbal repetition and long-range pre-planning recurs throughout the episode. On the same page, Pip notices “an elegant lady whom I had never seen” sitting beside Miss Havisham, phrasing that’s repeated verbatim a few paragraphs later: “The lady whom I had never seen before, lifted up her eyes and looked archly at me, and then I saw that the eyes were Estella’s eyes.” The “lady” reveals herself to be Estella, both familiar and yet “so much changed.” Looking back, we can see that Dickens inserted “whom I

278 Dickens, p. 214.

279 Dickens, p. 55.

280 “I took the opportunity of being alone in the court-yard, to look at […] my common boots.” (Dickens, p. 56.) Estella “gave me a triumphant glance in passing me, as if she rejoiced that […] my boots were so thick” (Dickens, p. 59.) “deeply revolving […] that my boots were thick” (Dickens, p. 59.) “I wish my boots weren’t so thick nor my hands so coarse.” (Dickens, p. 64.) “I thought long after I laid me down, how common Estella would consider Joe, a mere blacksmith: how thick his boots” (Dickens, p. 65.)

281 Dickens also applies this technique to the other twist evoked intermittently throughout this episode: the twist about Estella’s parentage. The phrase (italics in original) “What was it?” is repeated three times in the space of a few paragraphs, and evokes the much longer backstory of Estella’s parents (Dickens, pp. 217–18). Robert Douglas-Fairhurst notes that “One word – ‘attentively’ – is the trigger that would give [Pip] the answer,” since it was used 3 chapters earlier to describe Jaggers’s housekeeper, “but it would take an unusually attentive reader to make the connection without further prompting.” (Dickens, p. xix.)

282 Dickens, p. 214.
had never seen” as a bit of focalized narration, evoking Pip’s perceptions rather than the facts of the matter. Yet to call this narration “unreliable” would be an overstatement: he has not seen Estella since she became a “lady.” It’s an effect comparable to the visual effects in certain time travel movies where flickering, translucent images of people from another timeframe are overlayed on the present world. Present and past (and perhaps future) are brought close together but, instead of merging, the difference between them is made all the more visible. Pip may feel in danger of “slipp[ing] hopelessly back into the coarse and common boy again,” but the past undergirds the new developments of this episode rather than remaking the episode in its own image.

Which brings us to Miss Havisham. While there have been hints before this point in the novel of her desire to cling to and re-enact the past, indeed there have even been overt clues in her instructing Estella to “break Pip’s heart,” this scene makes the cruelty of her plans exceptionally clear. In part, this is because readers are only now equipped with some important details of Miss Havisham’s backstory which Pip did not have when he last spent time with her as a child. Herbert has recounted to Pip the story of Miss Havisham being jilted on her wedding day, so that only now is Pip equipped to understand the specific experiences Miss Havisham is referring to when she states that “real love is […] giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter – as I did.” Miss Havisham hopes to replicate her past in the present, but with a vengeful reversal that will see her stand-in Estella not heartbroken but acting as the heartbreaker.

283 Dickens, p. 219.
Rereaders may smile at Pip feeling that he is “pushing” Miss Havisham’s “chair itself back into the past”: he’s more right than he realizes.  

From the perspective of the novelist’s decision-making, Miss Havisham’s backstory, her heartbreak, her cantankerousness, her scheme for revenge by proxy – all are carefully planned elements that facilitate the plot. Vicarious crafters can think back to the numerous earlier scenes in which Dickens had established these elements, so that they come together here without making first-time readers utterly suspicious of Miss Havisham’s motives. Her apparent “fairy godmother” status leads Pip and readers to ignore a gradual pileup of signs that things are amiss, like a frog in a gradually warming pot of water. For vicarious crafters, this episode is impressive for presenting Miss Havisham’s malice with so little concealment. Perhaps, above and beyond the specific past events evoked which occurred at this same location, the feeling of readerly familiarity evoked through these palimpsests helps smooth over any mistrust: yes Miss Havisham is still stubborn, yes Estella is still haughty, and by now we’ve seen them often enough to know their nature and their intentions – or so a first-time reader may think.  

* * *  

At the risk of tautology, in vicarious crafting we observe the author plotting their plot. This is not unique to plot twists, but as a narrative device that requires extensive, complex plotting (pre-planning; gradual and sustained setup) to pull off successfully, rereading for the plotting is a particularly revealing way to re-engage with twists. Anecdotally, retracing the

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284 Dickens, p. 219.
plotting of a twist is an activity many people seem eager to engage in who otherwise wouldn’t be interested in reverse-engineering literary or narrative composition.

Perhaps this is because, more than most narrative forms or techniques – the marriage plot, say, or free indirect discourse – the plot twist, once it’s revealed, makes authorial intention part of the aesthetic experience. Despite the risk of readers judging a bad twist to be contrived, this doesn’t mean the ideal for a plot twist is to seem uncontrived, if by that we mean free from authorial artificing. In the mode of disillusioned ironizing, therefore diegetically immersed, rereaders can respond to elements of a twist as uncontrived coincidences; in the mode of vicarious crafting, on the other hand, rereaders assess events not in terms of chance but in terms of the author’s choice.285

To write about authorial intention at all in literary scholarship today is to risk being perceived as naive or hopelessly old-fashioned (and probably conservative). Given the consensus among major theoretical schools including New Criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, reader-response theory and cultural studies in favor of readers’ interpretive agency and against authorial intention, literary scholars tend to avoid the subject altogether. Almost by definition, the “readings” they offer of literary works center readers rather than authors.286


But twist narratives, at least for some readers, make authors and their intentions an integral part of the reading experience. Much like the conceits and gimmicks with which this chapter opened, and whose detractors had a strong sense of the author at work behind the scenes, a plot twist may lead readers to think about the person who made it. Insofar as you feel misdirected or even tricked by a twist, it’s natural enough to ask who misdirected or tricked you. While the orthodox scholarly answer would be “the text,” ordinary readers may be more likely to say “the author.”

Giving a place to authorial intention within the reading experience doesn’t in fact contradict the widely accepted critiques of intentionality – namely that authorial intent can’t determine the meaning of a literary work over and against whatever readers may think. It doesn’t matter to the account I’ve offered whether the flesh-and-blood Charles Dickens actually made his choices for the reasons I’ve speculated; it wouldn’t disprove my account if a letter or diary entry of his showed that he didn’t pre-plan some aspect of the twist’s setup. It doesn’t matter if my struckthrough counterfactuals weren’t present in Dickens’s manuscripts, or never even entered his mind. On the other hand, in defending interpretive freedom, literary scholars need not throw the baby out with the bathwater by making all talk of intention taboo. My account suggests that readers’ projections of authorial intention are a rich, under-appreciated aspect of the reading experience.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ My thinking is shaped here by Elfenbein’s account of the extraordinary staying power of authorial personas in readers’ memories: “The power of the imagined author in constructing a gist representation helps explain why, even though there are good theoretical reasons to question the truth of the imagined author as the purported origin of a literary work, it is almost impossible to read literary works without creating such a representation.” (Elfenbein, p. 108.) For a cognitive study of readers’ mental representations of an author, see Eefje Claassen, Author Representations in Literary Reading, Linguistic Approaches to Literature v. 11 (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co, 2012).
I concluded the previous section on disillusioned ironizing by discussing a shift from first-time readers’ probabilistic judgments of a narrative to disillusioned ironizers’ judgments of postdictability. As the term’s coiner Walter Kintsch defined it, postdictability is the criterion underpinning narrative satisfaction. When the apparently unpredictable events of a narrative turn out in retrospect to have an order and coherence to them, readers feel satisfied. I’m relatively persuaded by this as far as it goes, but in light of my discussion of vicarious crafting I now want to suggest that a narrative can be satisfying in more than one way. To what question are readers saying “I’m satisfied”? With a diegetic focus, certainly, the internal plausibility of events can feel like an important question about which readers may or may not declare themselves satisfied. But vicarious crafting, oriented outside the diegesis, asks a different question: am I satisfied with the choices the writer made? This question cannot be answered by appeal to postdictability; instead it involves mentally opening up a different range of possibilities – extra-diegetic this time – that were available to the author, and deciding whether we are (case by case, and overall) satisfied with the possibilities the writer chose.

Mentally replicating (a conjecture about) the author’s mind is not limited to readers of narrative. Edward Said has argued that humanists of all kinds should engage in a reading practice defined by “critical receptivity,” in which one “put[s] oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words.”288 In most cases, this work of reconstructing an author’s thinking demands a lifetime of rereading, but occasionally a “heroic first reading” is possible in which readers vicariously experience the “shattering

disorientation” involved in the “authorial heroism” of the person who “first carved out a path.”

Twist narratives are a rare case where a Saidian heroic first reading is more or less impossible, but an act of receptivity is more easily achieved on a second reading, without a lifetime of study.

Inspired by Barthes’s S/Z, Matei Calinescu suggests that rereading is closely connected with rewriting. More than first-time reading, rereading can prompt you to imagine how a work of fiction might be otherwise – knowing what’s in the work, you can begin to elaborate your own narrative that goes beyond or in a different direction from the narrative you’re reading. In some cases, this leads to actual acts of (re)writing: Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea, for example. But what if you reread a book and end up feeling like you don’t want to write a new book, because what’s there already works so well? Vicariously crafting a plot twist is something more modest than actual rewriting, but also more widespread: the thinking readers do in this mode may not leave written traces, but does allow readers to experience something of what it might have been like to write the work in front of them.

**Conclusion: Rereading and Continuing to Learn**

Recall the objections to conceits and gimmicks: that they display an embarrassing strain on the part of the writer, that they push readers into initially taxing cognitive efforts but are at heart vacuous and trivial. To their detractors, conceits and gimmicks are one-time, disposable tricks: once you discover their true nature you could only want to discard them and apply your mind to more edifying reading.

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289 Said, pp. 67, 68.
Similar cognitive-aesthetic assumptions underpin the widespread sense that plot twists are a disposable trick, unable to sustain a repeat experience. In fact, the question of whether narratives in general can reward rereading has troubled literary scholars. Nabokov, for example, in praising rereading, claims that:

one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader. [...] When we read a book for the first time [...] the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation.\(^{290}\)

I take “learning in terms of space and time what the book is about” to be in large part about narrative – what happens? when? where? There’s been a longstanding worry that reading narrative (at least first time round) is driven by one insatiable but shallow question: what’s next? Rereading a work of fiction, in this view, would be rewarding precisely because the narrative itself would fade away and readers would be able to focus on other, more properly artistic features of the work. From this perspective, plot is the alluring bait that draws you in, but what keeps you coming back is character, language, form…\(^{291}\)

In contrast, my analyses of *Great Expectations* in this chapter, and the two modes of rereading they illustrate, suggest that the narrative dimensions of a novel – what has happened, what is happening, what hasn’t happened yet, what one character knows is happening but another

\(^{290}\) Nabokov, p. 3.

\(^{291}\) This anti-plot ideal of novel-reading can be traced further back beyond Nabokov to Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction*, and through him to Henry James. In part the scholarly neglect of the plot twist might be due to deep-seated Jamesian principles that shaped the early history of the discipline and continue to underpin its assumptions. John Sutton Caughey, ‘How to Become an Author: The Art and Business of Literary Advice Handbooks’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 2016) offers an account of how this came to be, and argues that the importation of Jamesian principles into the study of literature meant transforming James’s ideals for writers into ideals for readers – an intriguing claim given the gray areas between reading and writing I’ve explored in this chapter.
doesn’t, what might have happened but didn’t – can continue to engage us beyond the first reading, and reward readers both on the level of thinking and feeling.

* * *

Beyond the internal thoughts and feelings that twist narratives can inspire in readers, plot twists have an exceptional power to make people think out loud. Leaving the cinema after watching a movie with a great, unexpected twist – or even a bad one – can spark prolonged conversations about our respective understandings (what was X intending in that scene? when did Y know…? why didn’t we notice…?) and also feelings (were you amazed when…? were you suspicious when…?). Such conversations may not strike scholars as particularly sophisticated: merely some light reasoning about characters and speculation on authorial intent.

Yet I follow Sianne Ngai’s account of “the interesting” in viewing such conversations about our respective understanding of an artwork, and how it affected each person’s experience, as a core feature of certain aesthetic experiences. Even when people disagree about whether a given artwork was “interesting” or not, the comparing of experiences reflects a shared commitment to understanding how the artwork affects different people, both what can vary and what aspects of the experience remain consistent regardless of prior knowledge or interpretive divergences. Twists too seem to call for such conversations, since the meaning-making activities they can inspire are both multiple and constrained. This is all the more true upon rereading: despite a scholarly tradition that views plot in general as a disposable, one-time gimmick, plot can continue to captivate people’s minds when they reread, even knowing where it’s going.

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292 Ngai.
My emphasis on conversation suggests a conception of reading as far more consensus-driven than is the norm in literary studies as a discipline. Literary scholars distinguish themselves not by reading a text the way everyone else does, but by setting themselves apart, by offering astonishing readings nobody else could have thought of. In this and the previous chapter I’ve sometimes wondered whether my own accounts of these narratives are too artless. But might the plot twist, and other such disposable devices, call for a different value system for reading? Not the dazzle of the virtuosically counter-intuitive reading, but the conversation that prompts recognition, understanding and further development. Reading as “yes and”?  

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Chapter 3. Share After Reading: The Twist of “The Necklace” in Circulation

Introduction: The People’s Plot

This is a chapter about the social life of plot. I study how a plot moves through a culture, how it circulates among people in a community. In particular, I examine how information about a specific plot was made portable, and thus was able to circulate far beyond those who read the literary work in which the plot originated.294

I focus on the plot of one specific twist narrative that had a particularly active and wide-ranging social life: Maupassant’s “The Necklace” (“La Parure”). Having gathered dozens of summaries of “The Necklace” in research for this chapter, I offer several here to refresh the memory of readers who know it and inform those who don’t yet:

in “La Parure,” a borrowed “diamond” necklace, lost and replaced at great sacrifice by the borrowers, is discovered to be nothing but costume jewelry.295

Mme. Loisel is the wife of a poor clerk; she borrows a diamond necklace from her rich friend Mme. Forestier, in order to adorn her beauty at a ball. On the way home from the ball the necklace is lost, and it is never found. The Loisels beg and borrow 36,000 francs to replace the necklace by another exactly like it, and they say nothing to Mme. Forestier of their calamity. For ten years the Loisels endure a life of the narrowest penury, and at length the 36,000 francs are repaid. Then Mme. Loisel, now a poor creature worn out by work, meets the still attractive Mme. Forestier, and tells her about the loss, and the substitution, which Mme. Forestier had never
discovered. Mme. Forestier informs her that the original necklace was paste and scarcely worth 500 francs.\textsuperscript{296}

Mme Loisel, is the wife of a small-time civil servant; she yearns for a life of luxury, especially for expensive clothes and jewellery, and is acutely irritable because of her husband’s meagre income. These feelings come to a head when the couple is invited to an official reception. She makes such a fuss over having nothing to adorn herself with that they borrow a diamond necklace from a more affluent acquaintance. The necklace is lost; after frenetic efforts they manage to borrow a huge sum, buy a replacement and return that (without revealing the mishap) to the lender of the necklace. M. and Mme Loisel spend the next decade in exhausting work to pay off the enormous debt. Only after that long period of expiation does the woman happen to learn that the borrowed necklace was merely a cheap imitation.\textsuperscript{297}

I’ve chosen these summaries to begin with because they all make some attempt in their prose to preserve, and indeed deliver a compressed version of, the surprise of the twist. A reader previously unfamiliar with the plot of “The Necklace” must engage in retrospective reinterpretation at the end of any of these summaries somewhat similar to the experience of a first-time reader of “The Necklace” itself. There’s more to “The Necklace” than its twist, but the twist comes across well even in these brief summaries.

The twist also came across well to its initial readership. The story first appeared in the newspaper \textit{Le Gaulois} in 1884, around midway through Maupassant’s relatively short yet highly prolific literary career from 1880-1890, during which he published over 300 short stories, as well as several successful novels. “The Necklace” reached a wide readership in the English-speaking world through publication of \textit{The Odd Number}, an 1889 collection of 13 tales by Maupassant. At around this time, Maupassant was also increasingly making headlines for his personal troubles as he shuttled in and out of mental and medical institutions until his death in 1893 at the age of 42.

\textsuperscript{296} Bennett.

\textsuperscript{297} Ian Reid, \textit{The Short Story}, [1977] 2018, p. 60.
By focusing narrowly on a single Maupassant story and its cultural life after publication, I don’t wish to suggest the irrelevance of other twist narratives of this period: a similar study might be made of Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* or O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi,” and would certainly enrich an account of the emergence of the plot twist. Nonetheless, the numerous and varied ramifications of the single Maupassant story I focus on in this chapter show just how substantial a contribution one individual literary work can make to the development of a device that is nonetheless far from unique to it. Moreover, my choice to focus on Maupassant’s “The Necklace” reflects a hypothesis that not all literary works contribute equally to the consolidation of a device. Reach (whether through popular appeal or elite canonicity) matters. While “The Necklace” hasn’t quite become an established idiom of the English language in the way Jekyll and Hyde has, awareness of this work – and specifically its twist – was extraordinarily wide-ranging at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century.

This is the only chapter in this dissertation to center on a work not written in English. I have selected “The Necklace” not only for its inherent importance to the development of the plot twist in the course of the nineteenth century, but also because it exemplifies the twist’s international and multilingual dimension. As the historical overview in the introduction makes clear, the plot twist was by no means an exclusively Anglo-American phenomenon in the nineteenth century. This chapter examines the travels of one particularly worldly twist. Indeed, we will see that as it travelled the twist was stripped of its specifically French qualities, so that it could act as a template for stories set anywhere in the world.

The portability of plot twists – the ease with which they can be summarized, abstracted, recycled – has often been treated as a defect. A portable plot implies reductiveness, whether on the part of the plot’s creator or the people excerpting and transmitting it. To isolate a plot, the
reasoning goes, is to dismiss everything else a literary work does with and around that plot. Reducing a plot to what a person might learn equally well from an encyclopaedia entry would be an insult to literariness itself. This chapter, in contrast, is motivated by curiosity about what positive, or at least not negative, consequences the portability of twist narratives might have.

What cultural work might a narrative achieve precisely because it can be readily moved around and retold? Who might it reach, and what new things might people do with it, in reductive formats?²⁹⁸

Behind these questions lie broader questions for the (pre-)history of the plot twist: what role did summaries, abstractions and retellings of specific twist narratives play in transmitting, and potentially even producing, knowledge of the plot twist as a general device? What does the social life of “The Necklace” allow us to observe about the development of the plot twist? What was this one story’s role in the longer transition from an unnamed and un-theorized construction at the start of the nineteenth century to a veritable industry in the early twentieth? Far from

taking place entirely at the interface between a reader and “the words on the page,” I argue that a culture’s repertoire of literary devices also develops through second-hand knowledge: discussions and disseminations not of literary works themselves but of their plots made portable.

The historical parameters of this chapter, extending from the 1880s to the early 1920s, derive both from the specifics of Maupassant’s career and the development of the plot twist as a device. In 1884 when “The Necklace” was first published, nobody discussed it as having a “twist” for the simple reason that this word had not yet acquired its specifically narrative meaning. Yet these years were also a boom time for twist narratives, including the aforementioned stories by Stevenson and O. Henry, Sherlock Holmes stories and the rise of detective fiction, as well as countless twist narratives now long forgotten and out of print, but which found a market in the explosion of magazines publishing short fiction from the 1880s onwards. Only in the mid-1910s did the term “plot twist” come into use.

This chapter uses discussions of “The Necklace” across the period as a way to probe developments in collective literary knowledge about the plot twist. It is across these decades that the term “plot twist” came to seem both intelligible (describing a pattern people recognized) and useful (a pattern that...

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299 By the 1910s, twists had achieved a degree of cultural saturation that allowed the term “plot twist” to emerge. The first instance of the phrase in the Google Books corpus, from a 1916 issue of The Lone Hand, stated that a “favorite formula of the hour for playwrights [was] the unexpected plot twist,” with both “of the hour” and “unexpected” attesting to the novelty of the term, while also implying that the underlying construction was familiar enough (perhaps in part because people had been growing accustomed to “O. Henry twist” since at least 1909). (‘New Things in the Theatre.’) In the same year, a young woman writing for a college paper is the first (in the Google Books corpus at least) to specifically cite “The Necklace” as a key example of the plot twist, asserting that “This is the era of the surprise dénouement in the short story. The average reader of this most popular form wants a ‘twist’ at the end of it” before going on to discuss “The Necklace” alongside stories by O. Henry and others (McGuire, p. 122). The following year, further up the academic food chain, two English scholars at Harvard explained that “The ‘surprise story’ […] thrills us by a sudden twist at the end” before citing “The Necklace” in the next sentence. (Chester Noyes Greenough and Frank Wilson Cheney Hersey, English Composition (Macmillan, 1917), pp. 202–3.)
described a number of significant literary works in people’s mental library), and “The Necklace” is part of the reason why.

This chapter is divided into three sections. Each section examines appearances of “The Necklace” in different kinds of print media, which serve as samples of the public discourse around this story. Section 1 examines how the plot circulated in newspapers. Section 2 looks at how the plot was discussed and transformed in advice manuals for aspiring fiction writers. Section 3 turns to two stories published after “The Necklace” in which its plot is explicitly evoked and implicitly stands as a model for these later stories’ own plots. At the end of the chapter, I return to questions about the reductiveness of plot summary.

3.1 “The Necklace” in Newspapers: Fiction Moves into the Real

In this section, I present and analyze summaries of “The Necklace” as they appeared in newspapers from 1884, the date of the story’s publication, to the early 1920s, when the story began to be discussed as a “twist” (and when “twists” as a category first started to be discussed). I organize my analysis around three distinctive ways that “The Necklace” was used in the journalism of the period: as a lens for interpreting real-world events; as an example in argumentative essays on social or moral topics; and as a reference point for assessing other narratives and/or the genre of the short story.

While summaries of “The Necklace” were used for different purposes in these three cases, in all three Maupassant’s story moves smoothly from the fictional into the real. It’s not
that journalists or their readers were deluded about its fictional status, but rather that the story – in particular in its summary form – impinged on real-world affairs.300

3.1.1 Interpreting Real-World Events: “The Necklace” as Ironic Lens

“The Necklace” is a work of fiction, so its appearance in the most newspaper of newspaper genres, the news item, is somewhat surprising. If we consider the primary purpose of news items to be reporting facts about recent events, the presence of a work of fiction within a news item seems to go beyond the discreditable act of journalistic editorializing into fundamental ontological error. Yet references to “The Necklace” did appear in numerous news items in the decades following its publication, and their presence points to the openness of newspapers of this period not only to the quasi-fictionality of real events but also to importing works of fiction into news reports as ways to make sense of real events.

In an item from the Austin Statesman titled “Maid Stole Mackay’s Pearls: She Paid for Them When She Had Married a Millionaire,” the twist-like structure is already hinted at in the title. The opening sentence makes this story’s status as a real-life twist explicit:

Everybody who read Guy de Maupassant’s story, “The Necklace,” cried “impossible!” No young couple, however conscientious, they said, would throw away a lifetime in expiation without verifying the cause of the impelling remorse. Well, here’s a parallel in real life, and it crops out in connection with the approaching marriage of Mrs. John W. Mackay’s granddaughter, which is to take place in Paris.301


The report that follows describes a maid whose rogueish lover made off with her mistress’s pearls, forcing the maid to scrimp and save for years like Mathilde to pay for the loss. The *deus ex machina* of marriage to a millionaire allowed the maid to finally buy her mistress a new string of pearls, only to learn that her self-imposed penury had been for nothing: the stolen pearls were fake. In a considerably milder echo of the regret implied at the end of “The Necklace,” the maid gives “a sigh of regret for the good times she might have had with the money she had saved toward atonement” and “beg[s] that her substitute pearls be given to Mrs. Mackay’s granddaughter as a bridal gift.” While I take the gift to the granddaughter to be a matter of fact, the “sigh of regret” seems to verge into fictionalizing, since there’s no indication that the journalist spoke with the maid to ascertain her thoughts and feelings at that moment. Instead, the template of “The Necklace” licensed a brief fictional flourish to underscore the emotional impact of this twist. Thus the two stories reciprocally reinforce each other: the story of Mrs. Mackay’s maid proves that “The Necklace” was not “impossible!” while “The Necklace” adds a dramatic flair to what would otherwise be a drier news report.

The theme of truth being stranger than fiction, or at least as strange as fiction, recurs across news items referencing “The Necklace.” Fiction is never straightforwardly replicated in reality, but their surprising convergence is an occasion for comment. An item in the Chicago Daily Tribune titled “Charges $9.50 for $10,000 ‘Job’: Expert Mechanic Robs Mrs. F. A. Lagorio of Jewels,” which like the previous example establishes a twist structure from its headline, opens with the suggestion that “De Maupassant probably would revise his short story classic of the diamond necklace if he could talk with Mrs. Frank A. Lagorio, wife of a Chicago physician,” before proceeding to recount “the plot” of the real-life events which involved a mechanic stealing a wealthy woman’s jewelry while ostensibly in her house to repair the
electrical wiring.\textsuperscript{302} The parallel with “The Necklace” here is looser than in the previous example: jewels are involved, but their authenticity is never in doubt; there is a vast discrepancy in sums of money, but only one sum concerns the value of the jewels; there is deception, but in service of deliberate theft not for the sake of face-saving. And of course there’s a twist: all along the electrician was a thief!

Both this and the previous example present a narrative with a twist-like construction, but in both cases the twist is given away upfront: in both, the combination of headline and opening reference to “The Necklace” allow readers to proceed through the news item with the knowingness of a re-reader. Foregoing the surprise of a first-time reader of a twist, these journalists instead opted for the knowingness of the re-reader, able to perceive dramatic irony of which the characters are themselves unaware. This points to a crucial distinction between what the text of a twist narrative can do within a culture compared to what a summary thereof can do. A summary of “The Necklace” functions as a shortcut to knowledge: whether or not a reader of these items had read “The Necklace,” they would quickly learn that the story involved “a young couple” who “throw away a lifetime in expiation without verifying the cause of the impelling remorse.”\textsuperscript{303} Armed with this knowledge, readers could then also approach the real-life story with a sense of superior insight. We see through the misunderstandings and ruses that Mrs. Mackay’s maid and Mrs. Lagorio do not. In this way, even though these news items import a degree of fictionality into their reporting, the parallel drawn with “The Necklace” serves to

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\textsuperscript{302} ‘Charges $9.50 for $10,000 ’Job’: Expert Mechanic Robs Mrs. F. A. Lagorio of Jewels,’ \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922)}, 1919, 1.
\end{flushright}

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\textsuperscript{303} ‘Maid Stole Mackay’s Pearls.’
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reinforce the felt truth of the story. Readers feel all the more strongly that they’ve been helped to know what really happened.

Some news items overtly played up the dramatic qualities of the truth revealed. In a formula that should by now be familiar, an item with the title “Jewel Thief Finds His Loot Is Paste” opened with the assertion that “The couple in one of Guy de Maupassant’s stories who discover, after years of hoarding to pay for a borrowed necklace that had been lost, that the original jewels were ‘paste’ had nothing on a thief who ‘permanently borrowed’ a case of what he thought were priceless diamonds from the Ince Studios during the filming of Thomas H. Ince’s comedy mystery, ‘A Man of Action.’” The reporter went on to explain that the director had secretly replaced some on-screen diamonds with a paste replica after several earlier “attempts” to steal them. The item concluded with a dramatic flourish in which the director evokes a cinematic denouement for readers: “Director [James W.] Horne’s only regret was that he could not have a ‘close-up’ of the thief’s features when informed of the value of his haul.” The “close-up” is itself only hypothetical, and continues the cycle in which fiction moves into reality and reality moves back into fiction. As with the “sigh of regret” of Mrs. Mackay’s maid, the news report permits itself to diverge from the strict facts, for which the opening parallel with “The Necklace” had already prepared the way.

Given the compression associated with “The Necklace” in its own right, and the further compression we’ve seen Maupassant’s story undergoing in these news reports, the brevity of most of the news reports is also a relevant factor. In part, this brevity isn’t unusual: “The


305 Journalists repeatedly emphasized the story’s “compression.” Indeed, one journalist went so far as to claim that Maupassant’s “best-known tale, ‘The Necklace,’ is just 1,200 words in length and yet cannot
Necklace” was not evoked in front-page news or in stories of national interest, but rather in pieces of local color, designed to raise a wry smile or a shake of the head, but not imply broader be outlined verbally by the most economical narrator in less than twice its space.” (The Reader, ‘Books And Their Makers,’ *The Baltimore Sun*, 1913, B6.) Evidently playing fast and loose with the facts (many shorter summaries of “The Necklace” were made, and the actual word count is around 3,000), this journalist’s claims speak hyperbolically to the widespread sense that there was not a single redundant word in “The Necklace.”

Much more could be said about compression in relation to literature. In the late nineteenth century, literary compression was a concern beyond Maupassant and the commercial pressures of magazine publishing. In Huysmans’s *A Rebours*, that Bible of Decadent literature, the protagonist dreams of writing a novel “concentrated into a few sentences which would contain the ultra-distilled juice of hundreds of pages” (“concentré en quelques phrases qui contiendraient le suc cohobé des centaines de pages”). (Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours* (Paris: G. Crès, 1922), p. 260, translations mine) In this longed-for miracle of compression, every single word would be so densely freighted with significance that it “could open such perspectives that the reader could muse, for weeks on end, on its meaning” (“ouvrirait de telles perspectives que le lecteur pourrait rêver, pendant des semaines entières, sur son sens”). In contrast to the mass appeal of commercial short stories, this ideal was also explicitly exclusive, accessible only to “ten superior persons dispersed across the universe” (“dix personnes supérieures éparses dans l’univers”). The close reading practices of literary scholars have clear affinities with the Huysmans fantasy.

Approaching compression in an information-theoretical sense, Dallas Liddle has reported findings that novels became less compressible, or more information-efficient, in the course of the nineteenth century. We could situate Maupassant as an extreme point in this trend. Of particular relevance to the study of the plot twist is Liddle’s discussion of “multiplexing,” an engineering technique that allows a system “to send more than one message simultaneously.” In parallel, “Novelists under information coding pressure may value and seek ways to make single lines of text do double duty, and ‘multiplexing’ novelistic discourse by simultaneously conveying a narrator’s perspective and a character’s, one character’s thoughts and another’s, or a character’s own perspective together with its ironization, do this double duty effectively.” (Dallas Liddle, ‘Could Fiction Have an Information History? Statistical Probability and the Rise of the Novel,’ *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, 4.2 (2019), 1-22 (p. 22).) Twist narratives, from this perspective, are thoroughly multiplexed texts: every line up until the reveal (which in the case of “The Necklace” is the very last sentence) has two distinct kinds of information potential within it.

We may also think of compression as an aspect of narration itself. When we talk of the compressed narratorial style of certain narratives, there is no original, longer version of the narrative against which we could measure a reduction of information. On the other hand, certain portions of a narrative – in particular “summaries” in Genette’s sense of scene vs summary – palpably cover events and stretches of time more sparingly than other portions of the narrative. A striking example is the two-sentence paragraph “He travelled.” (“Il voyagea.”) from Flaubert’s *L’Education sentimentale*, skipping abruptly over years in the protagonist’s life. (Gustave Flaubert, *L’Éducation Sentimentale* (Paris: Charpentier, 1891), p. 510.) Yet, strictly speaking, this may give the feeling of information without actually being information loss itself. (See Gérard Genette, *Figures III: Essais* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), 129-133, 228. Note that Genette distinguishes between “sommaire,” which he aligns with the English word “summary” and describes portions of fictional texts where time as narrated is less than the time of the events themselves, and “résumé d’intrigue,” which is an external summary of a plot.)
social or political significance. As such, brevity characterizes these stories, in part because there’s not much to tell. Particularly striking in its compression is the following story, which I quote in its entirety:

Truth, maugre [i.e. in spite of] the proverb-makers, is less strange and generally less interesting than fiction. But the other day, in Elkhart, Ind., Walter Moody died. For years he had been saving money to meet his funeral expenses. When the bankers counted the money, in $20 bills, they found it to be counterfeit. “And yet,” observes Mr. Wilfer P. Pond, “there were those who think Guy de Maupassant, with his necklace story, O. Henry, with his sables story, overplayed their literary hands.” 306

Elements we’ve already seen in other stories are present in condensed form here: the blurring of truth and fiction; the partial parallels with “The Necklace” (years of austerity, but to save money rather than pay off a debt; counterfeit items, but dollar bills rather than jewelry; the suggestion of a life wasted unnecessarily). What this item doesn’t in fact offer is a summary of “The Necklace”: indeed, strictly speaking, it doesn’t even refer to the story by name. On one level, this is evidence of the widespread familiarity with the plot of “The Necklace,” and in particular its twist, that a journalist could presume by 1920. It also points to a principle of efficiency that characterizes all these news reports: referencing “The Necklace” allowed the “true” story to be shorter. Even if the reference added slightly to the overall word count, it meant the journalist needed to do less work of their own establishing the narrative interest and payoff for the true story. Referencing “The Necklace” enabled a small economy of scale: two stories for the price of (slightly more than) one.

One noteworthy example that went in the opposite direction, towards narrative expansion, was an instalment of the “Bits of New York Life” column in The Atlanta

Constitution, which devoted seven paragraphs to a case that the opening sentence called “A reverse twist on Guy de Maupassant’s story of the lost necklace, considered by many as the perfect short story.” It may be in part because the piece is less a news story than a piece of non-fiction entertainment, the story details the surprising events at “a big Fifth avenue jewelry store the other day,” where a woman who brought in a $25 imitation pearl necklace for repair was told that “this string of pearls is not an imitation. It is worth $100,000, and belongs to the wife of the president of one of the biggest railroads in America.” (As this quotation indicates, this item differs from the previous examples in including dialogue as well scene-setting and characterization.) After recounting the investigation, the piece concludes that an “innocent clerk had unwittingly sold” the $100,000 necklace after it had accidentally “been mixed up in a case of cheap imitation pearls.” The railroad owner’s wife gets her necklace back, and the other woman gets $1,000 in compensation, so the story seems to be concluding more happily than “The Necklace,” but the journalist makes a swerve at the end to return to an ostensibly minor character, the “innocent clerk,” who before the mistake had been unraveled was “accused” of stealing the necklace, was “dismissed,” “took to drink” and finally committed “suicide.” The item concludes with the tart comment, having itemized the compensation to the two women, that “it was not revealed what compensation was given to the wife and family of the clerk who was so unjustly accused.” The much-discussed cynicism of Maupassant’s twist ending reappears, but here it is decoupled from the twist itself and displaced onto a new character. More than the other news items which recounted events briefly and invited a kind of knowingness from the get-go.

through comparison with “The Necklace,” this story invited knowingness but then surprised readers at the end with disturbing ramifications that go beyond the fictional template.

News items which summarized or cited the “The Necklace” as a starting point for their own stories shared a common effect of dramatic irony. Once readers have “The Necklace” in mind, the new story won’t function like a twist for a first-time reader, but will instead invite perception of the dramatic irony that twist rereaders perceive by means of disillusioned ironizing. This is, of course, strikingly different from the first-time reading experience of “The Necklace” itself. Whereas an unspoiled reading of “The Necklace” might produce surprise, horror and pity, these evocations of “The Necklace” produce irony, knowingness, a sense of superior insight shared by writer and reader over and against the people in the story.

3.1.2 All That Glitters Isn’t Diamond: “The Necklace” as Moral Example

Within newspapers, news items were one genre in which references to “The Necklace” recurred throughout the period under consideration. But the final example discussed above, with its strong moral condemnation of the mistreatment of an “innocent clerk,” connects to another genre in which references to “The Necklace” were common: the moralizing essay. Perhaps “genre” is misleading: these texts are not necessarily overtly labelled as essays, but they share an essayistic mode in which reasoning, argumentation and judgment are primary, and narrative (in contrast to the news items) is subsidiary or entirely absent. Like today’s op-eds, these were texts which might reference current events but whose primary purpose was not to report on them. In these contexts, the narrative content of “The Necklace” was not denied, but its evocation served not to make sense of another narrative but rather to make a generalizable moral argument.

The earliest example I’ve found appears in Le Petit Moniteur universel just three years after the publication of “The Necklace.” A piece titled “Chronique: Tout en Toc” (“Chronicle:
It’s All a Knock-Off”) opens with the assertion that “it’s certainly a sign of the difficult times we are going through that fakes, or knock-offs as is vulgarly said, are everywhere predominant” (“Ceci est bien un signe des temps difficiles que nous traversons, c’est le faux, le Toc, comme on dit vulgairement, qui domine en tout”). The piece opens with speculative explanations for the rise in imitation goods (is it due to falling public or private incomes? Or contempt for commercial things?), moves into a series of political and high-society anecdotes about fake jewels before concluding with a gesture towards other goods where deception is widespread (such as horses). Naturally enough given the topic, “The Necklace” is evoked

Who does not know the pretty tale by Mr. Guy de Maupassant, titled “The River,” in which the wife of a low-level employee borrows from a friend for some ball or other a diamond necklace. She loses it, and to buy a replica she bleeds herself dry. Her modest fortune and that of her husband are swallowed up. They become servants, and when, ten years later, the poor woman encounters her former friend who no longer recognizes her in her rags, when she recounts to her the affair, the other woman turns pale and says:

What follows are three lines of dialogue which convey the gist of the original story’s final sentences, though by no means verbatim. Perhaps fittingly for an essay on knock-offs, there’s a striking combination of close resemblance and carelessness in this writer’s summary of “The Necklace.” The title is misremembered as “The River,” yet this in itself suggests a decent familiarity with Maupassant’s oeuvre: on its first mention in “The Necklace,” the titular jewels are called a “river of diamonds” (“rivière de diamants”), and the writer may also be half-

308 †Chronique: Tout en Toc,’ Le Petit Moniteur universel, 1887.
309 “Qui ne connaît ce joli conte de M. Guy de Maupassant, intitulé la Rivière, dans lequel la femme d’un petit employé emprunte à une amie pour un bal quelconque une parure en diamants. Elle la perd et pour acheter la semblable se saigne aux quatre veines. Sa modique fortune et celle de son mari sont englouties. Ils deviennent domestiques, et lorsque, dix ans plus tard, la pauvre femme rencontre son ancienne amie qui ne la reconnaît plus sous ses haillons, lorsqu’elle lui raconte l’aventure, celle-ci lui dit toute pâle :”
remembering another Maupassant story “Sur l’eau,” which takes place on a river (indeed the English title is “The River”) and also ends in a twist. The dialogue is misquoted. The essay in general bears other signs of being dashed off quickly to fill column inches (“Diamonds […] are becoming increasingly rare […] That is because everyone is selling them” (“Les diamants […] deviennent de plus en plus rares […] Cela tient à ce que tout le monde les vend”) – in context this reads not as Wildean wit but as a lack of editing). Yet the plot summary quoted above is a model of concision and accuracy. Indeed, the fact that the plot flowed so readily from the pen of a writer on deadline, evidently cutting corners elsewhere, suggests that within three years the story had already entered the popular imagination in France as an easily evoked reference point for fake jewels: who does not know the pretty tale of the life wasted for fake diamonds?

The essay’s overall tone is not strongly moralizing, but one of understatedly ironic condemnation: the writer notes that the French government must “despise these kinds of riches” (“méprise ces sortes de richesses”), since it recently sold off the diamonds in the royal crown, and follows its ersatz dialogue from “The Necklace” with a dry one-sentence paragraph: “Factories for false jewels are large in number and doing excellent business.” (“Les fabriques de faux bijoux sont très nombreuses et font d’excellentes affaires.”) Yet even without an overt moral, the condensation, and even the casualness with which “The Necklace” was presented, points to the story’s rapidly-acquired use, in summary form, as a modern fable.

Satirizing or condemning the vanity of wealth was a use to which “The Necklace” could be readily put. An instalment of the “Smart Sets in Other Cities” column in The Washington Post evoked the recent news that the pearls of Mrs. Astor, “the acknowledged leader of New York’s fashionable society,” had been revealed as fake after her death. This served as a jumping off point for a harsh assessment of “the apparition of the symbols of wealth” in “New York
society.” The moralizing conclusion that the “deliberate proclamation of wealth […] may often lack solid foundation” is followed by a particularly compact evocation of “The Necklace”: “We all remember Guy de Maupassant’s tale of the woman who borrowed a diamond necklace to make a show at a ball, lost it, and slaved all the remainder of her life to pay for it.” Notably, this summary doesn’t even mention that the “diamond necklace” was fake, a fact directly relevant to the preceding discussion of imitation jewels, suggesting that “we all remember” is not rhetorical but actually assumed by the author. The twist did not even have to be mentioned to be evoked. That said, in the manner of a rereader of a twist narrative, in retrospect earlier parts of the commentary can be read as oblique commentary on the twist of “The Necklace”: “just how far the jewelry of society is false makes very little difference, so long as it glitters”; “The unquestionably rich may wear imitation jewels with impunity. Their genuineness will never be questioned.” Coming after such general statements, “The Necklace” serves to ground truisms about the illusions of the rich in a specific, familiar, albeit fictional, example.

The plot of “The Necklace” comes at the conclusion of the first broadly moralizing section of this column, which then morphs into a conventional society news column, devoting three times as many words to a report on a lavish ball in Chicago that week. Yet the opening section casts a shadow over the ball: in particular, beyond the decadence of live songbirds and an “alluring Persian garden” replete with “Palms and ferns” and “white chrysanthemums” (in Chicago! in December!), the itemizations of various guests’ “diamond ornaments,” “diamonds galore” and “exquisite diamonds” have an ironic ring. How many of these jewels were fake, a reader may wonder, and how many more jewels, even if real, concealed a lack of “solid

310 ‘Smart Sets in Other Cities: Interesting Events and Gossip, Both at Home and Abroad; as Chronicled in The Post’s Exchanges,’ The Washington Post, 1909, 5.
foundation”? Reversing the epistemic structure of a twist narrative, this column offered a transformative interpretive lens upfront, but then recounted events with no apparent interpretive angle. It was left to readers to supply the Maupassant-esque twist, discovering that even at the most glamorous ball of the season, all that glittered wasn’t gold.

A similar use of “The Necklace” to raise suspicion about jewelry, and thus implicitly satirize the wealthy for alert readers, occurred in a brief item within a longer society news column reporting on “a new fad” in “Seattle society”: literature classes. A series of vignettes presents wealthy young heiresses swaddled in furs and dripping in jewels answering questions from an instructor at the University of Washington, who asks one attendee:

“Miss Downs, point out the first instance of anticipatory suggestion in De Maupassant’s story, ‘The Necklace.’” And Miss Alla Downs, whose $5,000 limousine panted outside and whose diamond ring betokened her engagement to a Vancouver mine owner, did as she was told.

The mockery is certainly not subtle, but when juxtaposed with the previous society column a more cynical implication begins to emerge through the evocation of “The Necklace”: that these women are not only shallow and vain, but that the trappings of wealth may be entirely hollow. Whether or not the diamonds, furs, limousines and “Japanese chauffeur” are the real deal or fake, the evocation of “The Necklace” with all the associations the story then had might have suggested to readers that it’s all for show. Might some readers have even anticipated a twist-like comeuppance for these spoiled young women? Quite what “The Necklace” would have meant for this newspaper’s readership is hard to know, but in the manner of Elaine Freedgood’s “strong metonymic reading” I want to study the meanings this work acquired “beyond the covers of the

text,” and thus give back to “The Necklace” a “radiance or resonance of meaning” it has “not legitimately possessed in previous literary-critical reading.” Whether an individual reader of this particular satirical article picked up on them, the moralizing meanings of “The Necklace” were out there in circulation.

Not all moralizing uses of “The Necklace” focused on the vanity of wealth. A second moralizing strand picked up on the story’s theme of needless and self-imposed suffering. A piece titled “Needless Suffering: The Best Years of One Woman’s Life Spent in a Vain Sacrifice of Self” captured the moral in a nutshell. The piece begins by announcing what it takes to be the moral of Maupassant’s story (“There is a clever story by De Maupassant which throws a searchlight across the sea of suffering, and gives a glimpse of the horrors hidden in its depths”) before launching into the longest (least compressed) plot summary I’ve found in any newspaper, at 425 words. Like one of the more slapdash summaries I discussed above, this summary includes its own rewording (longer than Maupassant’s original) of the story’s final lines of dialogue. The summary then concludes with an ampler elaboration of what the author took to be the moral:

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\text{Freedgood, pp. 5, 6.}
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\[312\] Tangentially, I find this article fascinating as evidence for the longer history of (re-)reading twist narratives on the hunt for “anticipatory suggestion,” which I theorized in Ch.2 as “disillusioned ironizing.” Not only can this activity be enjoyable, as the young women in this article discovered, but the fact they’re turning to university instructors for guidance in the activity marks a curious moment in disciplinary history where plot analysis was seen as a respectable part of university-level literary study. On the other hand, perhaps there’s already a suggestion here of the unworthiness of plot analysis: these heiresses simply “do as they’re told,” suggesting it’s not so much an act of critical thinking as a procedure that anyone can perform when pressed.

Fancy the feelings of the unhappy woman who learns that she has suffered needlessly. That all the pleasures and pursuits she has been shut out from might have been hers; that her face might yet have been fair, and her form young if she had only not kept silence at that time of crisis.

The twist, at least for readers like myself who hadn’t looked ahead, is that this piece isn’t an article but an advertorial promoting the practice of Dr. R. V. Pierce of Buffalo, NY, self-proclaimed as “one of the foremost specialists in women’s diseases.” The next section of the advertorial pivots smoothly from the singular fictional example to the mass of real women suffering:

That was how one woman’s life was wasted in needless sacrifice and suffering. There are thousands and tens of thousands of other women who lead a life of suffering more pitiable and even more unnecessary.

Unnecessary, because they could write to Dr. Pierce and order his “Favorite Prescription” which “MAKES WEAK WOMEN STRONG, SICK WOMEN WELL.” Even after this abrupt swerve from fiction to the reality of naked commercialism, the taste of the fictional lingers: there are testimonials from women who may or may not be real, raving about the “Favorite Prescription.” Beyond this advertorial, Dr. Pierce himself was one of the most successful sellers of mail-order medicines from the 1870s to the 1910s whose “media-savvy” led him to use “just the right amount of medical terminology and human pathos” to make his cures “seem authentic and scientifically possible” (in many cases they contained alcohol and opium). 315

This use of human pathos to sell medicines makes retrospective sense of the summary’s length, which had a level of detail and verbal evocativeness that would almost qualify it as a short story in its own right, and lingered in particular on how the protagonist “loses her freshness

and fairness” and becomes “old in looks.” Indeed, although shorter than “The Necklace” its ending is in fact an expansion of the original ending. I’ve already mentioned the lengthening of the final lines of dialogue. More importantly, the moralizing final paragraph (“Fancy the feelings…”) quoted above is presented on the page as internal to the story rather than an external comment on it (it continues the paragraphing used throughout the summary, and is followed by a line break and a new section header). Although summary allowed “The Necklace” to be cut down to convenient size, the story’s strikingly abrupt dénouement, which ends on a line of dialogue and does not conclude with an account of the aftermath or narratorial commentary, also provided an opening for moralizers to continue the story in their own preferred way. Think of it as fan fiction, in which a plot point absent from the original text is invented just beyond the bounds of the original story.

A specifically gendered moral about needless suffering was also appended to a summary of “The Necklace” in an instalment of the “Woman to Woman Talks” column by Kathleen Norris. As usual, this particular instalment announced its message in the subtitle: “It Is You and I Who Keep Our Nation From Being What It Might Be.”316 After a few paragraphs introducing the idea that each woman is her own worst enemy, “poisoning [her] own days” as well those of her husband, children and community, a subheading “Paying Imaginary Bills” adds the idea that “the real tragedy” is that the “bills” women harm themselves and others to pay off are “imaginary.”

We all know de Maupassant’s classic story of the pearls: it is supposed to be one of the few perfect short stories of the world. I never liked it myself, because it has a bad and, to me, an unnatural ending. This is the story briefly:

316 Kathleen Norris, ‘Woman to Woman Talks,’ The San Francisco Examiner, 1922, 28.
Widespread knowledge of “The Necklace” is presumed, and the general perception of it as a “perfect” short story is evoked, but this didn’t stop Norris from dissenting from, and in effect rewriting, the ending.

After a one-paragraph summary, Norris offered her moralizing amendment: “Where I quarrel with de Maupassant is when he makes the borrower embittered and crushed by the lesson, which was probably the best thing that ever happened to her!”317 This framing of Mathilde’s suffering as not tragic but morally improving leads in turn back to the column’s overall moralizing advice to women in general: “most of us, like the sociable little wife, are paying for paste pearls. […] we thereby [do] a thousand times more to hurt our own lives than the most ingenious outside influence that ever existed anywhere.” At this point we’re only about a quarter of the way into the column: the rest of the article remains in a more generalized focus, shifting between “you,” “we,” “the woman,” “a woman,” and “women” as it offers further vignettes (none of them literary) of supposedly self-imposed suffering. Indeed, there’s another twist narrative of sorts in the story of a woman Norris knew personally who “had a hundred enemies, and talked of them all day,” suffered from “pimpled skin” and died “exhausted and old, at fifty.” Only “when she lay dead” were those around her able to “s[ee] that she had beautiful hair and eye lashes, and that the fretful, disfigured face was of a lovely shape.” All along, this woman could have been beautiful, if only she hadn’t made herself ugly!

The broader point here is that, across these various writings in essayistic mode, an initial discussion of “The Necklace” opened the door to further narratives, and even when those were

317 Note that Norris engages in additional revision in her summary of Maupassant’s story, which famously does not depict Mathilde’s reaction to “the lesson,” whether “embittered and crushed” or otherwise, instead breaking off in mediis rebus.
presented as non-fiction the themes of illusion and deception raised by “The Necklace” dispersed a dusting of fictionality over what followed. Yet this blurring of the fictional and the real didn’t invite doubt about the credibility of the author or the stories they recounted (though in the case of Dr. Pierce we may nonetheless want to be sceptical). Rather, the preexisting familiarity of “The Necklace” gave the story a proverbial status that was further enhanced through summary. Whereas Maupassant’s “The Necklace” had been provocatively amoral, summaries of “The Necklace” smoothly transitioned into and out of moral messages.

3.1.3 Electrifying or Meretricious? “The Necklace” as Reference Point for Other Plots

This third section on newspapers focuses on “The Necklace” as a reference point for the discussion of other plots – whether of specific short stories, plays and novels or of short-story plotting in general – in reviews and essays with an explicit literary subject. I’ve reserved this section last for two reasons. First, the discussions here resemble most closely the literary-historical and literary-theoretical discussions in scholarship, and thus might give a false sense of transferability to our own time and context if introduced before the wackier uses of “The Necklace” we’ve now already seen, and with which these texts shared the page. Second, the discussions tend to be more abstract than those in the previous sections, and I hope will be easier to read now having immersed ourselves in particulars for a while. This section will begin with references to “The Necklace” in relation to the plots of specific short stories, novels and plays, before turning to more general discussions of the short story as a genre.

When a reviewer confronted a new literary work, the plot of “The Necklace” provided a template which the reviewer could either recognize in the new work or find wanting there. An example of the former is a review in The Manchester Guardian of “a remarkable short story” by Srijukto Jalahdar Sen that had recently appeared in Indian Magazine. Following a plot summary,
The reviewer notes that “There is no lack of Oriental colour in this pathetic narrative, but the reader of Guy de Maupassant will recognise in it the pale image of ‘La Parure,’ certainly one of the best of the short stories of that famous writer.”\textsuperscript{318} And indeed, the summary which features a government employee and his wife taking on ruinous debt to silently replace jewelry lost at a ball, only to discover years later that “the lost ornaments were only gilt,” does resemble “The Necklace” beat for beat. The reviewer went on to ask:

\begin{quote}
Is this a case of imitation, or has the idea occurred spontaneously both in East and West? It is certainly no case of vulgar plagiarism, for whilst the \textit{motif} is identical, the artistic treatment is essentially different. “The Borrowed Amulets” is as distinctively Hindoo as “La Parure” is distinctively French in its atmosphere.
\end{quote}

Detecting a parallel between the two plots isn’t to the disadvantage of either story: Maupassant’s is “one of the best short stories” while Sen’s is “remarkable.” And while the underlying construction of the plot may be the same, the “atmosphere” that surrounds each is distinct enough that each story can be appreciated in its own right. Curiously, the summary at the center of this review doesn’t include any of the supposed local color of this Indian story – indeed, with a few tweaks it could also quite accurately summarize its “distinctively French” counterpart. Summary itself acts somewhat like what in machine translation is called an “interlingua,” a vehicle for meaning that is not language-specific but allows for equivalent meaning to be established between two natural languages.\textsuperscript{319} Perhaps in this way of thinking, 

\textsuperscript{318} ‘Books and Bookmen,’ \textit{The Manchester Guardian}, 1901, 5.

\textsuperscript{319} The complication, however, is that, this summary is itself a fully-fledged, if highly compressed, story in its own right. As Kintsch and Van Dijk note, “a summary must also itself be a narrative” (“le résumé doit être également un récit”). (Walter Kintsch and Teun A. Van Dijk, ‘Comment on Se Rappelle Et on résume Des Histoires,’ \textit{Langages}, 1975, 98–116 (p. 104).) This recursive relationship between plot and plot summary is a curious one, and rare among the elements of literary works: a summary of a character is not a character; a summary of an image is not an image; a summary of a rhyme scheme is not a rhyme scheme; etc.
ownership of a plot becomes less important: writers are credited for the specificities of atmosphere, or more broadly execution, but the plot itself is a kind of public property.

In the sources I’ve found, a similar plot to “The Necklace” is never a source for complaint. On the other hand, straying too far from its plot could be. A review of a new play opened with a (moralizing) summary of “The Necklace”:

There is a rather dreadful little story by Maupassant about a delicately-bred, middle-class woman forced to sacrifice her youth and her prettiness in the harshest sort of household toil in order to pay off a debt which her vanity had incurred, and which a mixture of vanity and self-respect would not let her repudiate. 320

The reviewer went on to concede that

It has not very much bearing on “The Land of Promise” […] But it has just enough bearing to make one wonder what sort of a job Maupassant would have made of the theme of “The Land of Promise,” and in what sort of a coldly triumphant tragedy, too brilliant to wring even a sigh from the spectator, he would have broken the fragile beauty of Miss Irene Vanbrugh as Nora Marsh.

The reviewer’s objection was that the play concluded “with a happy ending,” and Maupassant’s story, and its cruel twist, is referenced here primarily as an example of a harsh but more morally appropriate way to end a story. Whereas The Land of Promise had, in this reviewer’s eyes, a bad turn at the end, Maupassant’s twist is evoked as a turn of events that is nonetheless consistent with what came before. Whenever writers flirted with a surprise ending, “The Necklace” was there as a widely-recognized high standard against which others could be measured.

Maupassant’s “The Necklace” wasn’t the only reference point for evaluating surprise endings: O. Henry, after rising to considerable success around 1905, was often namechecked

alongside Maupassant. O. Henry is himself a crucial figure in the popularization of the plot twist, turning an occasionally used construction across Maupassant’s hundreds of stories into a cottage industry. Although “The Gift of the Magi” may be his best-known twist story today, in his own time his production of twist narratives was so prolific that, unlike Maupassant and “The Necklace,” O. Henry was typically cited by name without specifying a particular short story. Indeed, beyond becoming a one-man twist factory, his output led to the twist becoming a commercially-desirable category within the publishing industry, as evidenced by *The Editor*, a “Journal of Information for Literary Workers,” which relayed the advice in a column “on the Writing and Selling of Manuscripts” that “Young’s Magazine, as everyone knows, goes in for the O. Henry twist ending.”

Although both Maupassant and O. Henry became known for their twist narratives, references to the two together didn’t simply conflate them: on the contrary, when it came to models for surprise endings, O. Henry was often unfavourably contrasted with “The Necklace.” For example, a piece on the English writer Leonard Merrick situates his work in relation to Maupassant and O. Henry. The reviewer notes that “in conversation you will constantly find” Merrick and O. Henry “linked and their works compared” in fact “Neither has brought the short story to the astonishing brevity achieved by Guy de Maupassant, whose best-known tale, ‘The Necklace,’ is just 1,200 words in length and yet cannot be outlined verbally by the most economical narrator in less than twice its space.” The claims here are remarkably unconcerned with fact: “The Necklace” (in its English translation that appeared in *The Odd Number*) is around

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321 May.

322 The Reader.
2,900 words, and as we’ve seen throughout this chapter, summaries of various lengths, though always shorter, were abundant in newspapers of the time. Instead, these claims point hyperbolically to the aesthetic quality of “compression,” which will be discussed in more detail below as a potential criterion for a good short story. As surprise endings go, O. Henry and Merrick may be “freer and more natural,” but they don’t achieve the acme of compression that led journalists to lose their numerical minds over “The Necklace.”

A similar contrast in evaluation of Maupassant’s and O. Henry’s surprise endings was made in a review of a short story collection by Oswald Wildridge, which notes that the author is a lover of “surprise,” and the point of several of his stories depends on a revelation concealed in the last sentences. That method, popularised by O. Henry with admirable art, has the defect of confining the real motive of the tale to one infinitesimal part and making it shock attention by the sharpness of its detonation.323

O. Henry here is an “admirable” example of a trend that is made to seem somewhat aesthetically “defective,” in which an entire work’s raison d’être is contained within one tiny part, its last sentence. There is also a hint of weariness in the word “popularised,” which casts doubt on both O. Henry and Wildridge as simply reiterating a well-worn “method.” The reviewer went on to lament how many of Wildridge’s stories “escape from the rigours of significant […] construction,” opting instead for “meretricious construction.” Meretricious – superficially attractive and showy but ultimately empty and without value – is how this reviewer judged the lesser stories produced by the “method” of surprise endings. Maupassant is nowhere mentioned in this part of the review, but appears only at the end when the reviewer approvingly contrasts one story in the collection, which “is remarkably fine and reminds one of that fatal dénouement

in Maupassant’s ‘Necklace.’” The twist goes unmentioned here, indeed even the fact it has a surprise ending isn’t stated, but “reminds one of” suggests once again that this reviewer assumed a collective familiarity with “The Necklace” such that these features wouldn’t need mentioning. For readers who could fill in the gaps here, the implication was clear: O. Henry and his successors have led to an industry of sub-standard surprise endings, while Maupassant’s “The Necklace” is the gold standard which most of their work failed to come close to.

With this discussion of how the surprise ending became a “method” for producing short stories, I turn to the place of “The Necklace” within broader discussions of the short story genre in the period. While opinion varied on whether its status was a good thing or a bad thing, there was general agreement that “The Necklace” was “the prototype of the very modern short story.”324 Across both positive and negative assessments, discussion tended to focus on two main aspects: narrative compression and the ending. The following passage compactly covers both:

The secret of a good short story, after all, may be summarized. Take a well-constructed five-act drama; condense, condense and continue to condense; […] make the result a compression into one act and close sharply with a “quick curtain,” and above all no epilogue. It sounds easy. But it took a de Maupassant to give us a “Necklace.”325

“The Necklace” was the first of four exemplary stories listed, alongside stories by Kipling, Stevenson and Bret Harte. What we see here with unusual clarity is a vernacular theory of the short story in which “The Necklace” was a key reference point. The exceptional compression of Maupassant’s story, which we’ve already seen discussed earlier in this section of the chapter, is here offered as an instruction to all writers: condense, condense, condense! And

324 Bennett.

besides the internal paring-down of a “five-act drama” into “one act,” the ending too must cut off “sharply.” Similar notes were struck in a piece comparing Petronius and Maupassant as satirists, which praised Maupassant’s “language so direct and stripped down that into a story of 2000 words he could pack more dramatic force than any other man who has ever used the short story as a medium” and ended with an anecdote in which a friend of Maupassant’s asked for “some conclusion, some lesson drawn” to a story, to which Maupassant replied “One whose passion is for facts […] cannot stoop to drawing conclusions.”

An even more compact assertion of the place of “The Necklace” at the pinnacle of short story art came in an article titled “Is This the Greatest Short Story Ever Written?” in which the Chicago Daily Tribune reported on having surveyed a carefully selected number of college professors of English in all parts of the United States asking their opinion as to which is the greatest short story ever written. […] The honor fell to Guy de Maupassant’s masterpiece, “The Necklace.” A majority of the instructors agreed that this tale, which so truly depicts the price of vanity, the terribleness of ten years’ personal sacrifice to pay a debt, and the irony of life, ranked highest among the gems of narratives.

The summary here barely counts as a plot summary: the summary is largely thematic, and indeed conceals plot as theme (“irony of life” is a roundabout way to describe the twist). The extreme compression of this summary in which plot almost disappears makes more sense when we notice that the article concludes with the statement that “‘The Necklace’ is reproduced in full upon this page.” The rare abstention from discussing the twist was due to the newspaper wanting

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327 ‘Is This the Greatest Short Story Ever Written?’ Chicago Daily Tribune, 1913, F2.
its readers to actually read the reprinted story. It’s certainly a canny way to fill column inches with existing material, and indeed we may wonder whether the entire survey was just a marketing tool to give an old story new timeliness. Regardless, this was an unusual moment where a discussion of “The Necklace” was intended to lead smoothly into a reading of it. Unlike the previous examples, no specific reason is given for the story’s genre-defining greatness. Indeed, for a reader already familiar with “The Necklace” it’s clear how much is withheld or misrepresented: “so truly depicts” is true in a sense, but the story also falsely depicts events; “the price of vanity” is teasing, since Mathilde overestimates the price of the necklace. These oblique strategies signal in fact that this article differs from all the others in crafting a pre-reading environment (the story is literally below it), which I examine in more detail in Ch.4. Nonetheless, even for pre-readers, the pre-eminence of “The Necklace” within the short story genre was something they were made to know. The twist was the central, but here unstatable, reason for the supreme status of “The Necklace” within the genre.

I conclude this section with two discussions that question the status of “The Necklace” as exemplary of the short story genre. The first is a brief but aesthetically dense reflection within a review of a new translation of Maupassant. The reviewer concludes a long biographical and literary-critical appraisal (including of “The Necklace”) with a sincere but unanswerable question:

Which is to be preferred, a tale by Maupassant which electrifies your mind and scorches your soul while you read it, but which you do not have to read twice, for you get it all the first time, or a work such as Gerhart Hauptmann’s “Sunken Bell” which merely blurs and befuddles on the first reading and then appeals to you, on
the twentieth reading, as one of the greatest works written in any language since 1896? The question can [not] be answered. The agnosticism is especially remarkable when contrasted with the scholarly consensus that emerged around this time, and persisted through the twentieth century, that the question could be answered: in favor of the befuddling, rereadable work and to the detriment of the electrifying one-time read. The discussions of compression and endings we’ve seen so far here expand into more abstract questions about temporality, affect and cognition. How can we evaluate a brief, intense and highly intelligible experience in comparison with a more lingering affectively muted that demands repeated returns to make sense of? It’s also relevant to note that The Sunken Bell was a Maeterlinck-esque blank-verse play about sprites and fairies, so that the comparison here is not only between a short story and a play but also between popular and hermetic art. For my purposes, this article is important as a testament to the sophistication and seriousness with which newspaper writers treated the “electrifying” power of Maupassant’s short stories. Perhaps they recognized an affinity with the ephemeral readability of Maupassant’s stories, which were of course written for publication in daily newspapers. Knowing what side their bread was buttered on, journalists couldn’t afford to disdain an electrifying short story.

There were certainly exceptions that proved the rule: the New York Tribune reprinted an essay from The Academy and Literature, a weekly review, titled “‘The Necklace’: A Glance at Maupassant and the Short Story.” The author E. A. Bennett opened with the familiar gesture of


329 I take from Bronstein’s Out of Context the suggestion that literary value could reside in (and was seen by certain Modernist writers to reside in) the ability of a work to deliver captivating first-time (or one-time) reading experiences to readers into the future, as opposed to rewarding an individual person’s repeated rereading of the same work.
“everyone knows” followed by a plot summary: “Most people are familiar with the story of ‘The
Necklace.’ Mme. Loisel is the wife of a poor clerk…”330 The one-paragraph summary is
relatively compressed, and important for what comes next is the elision of Mathilde’s motive for
not telling her friend about the loss, namely that Mme Forestier might take her for a thief (“Ne
l’aurait-elle pas prise pour une voleuse?”), in the sentence “The Loisels beg and borrow 36,000
francs to replace the necklace by another exactly like it, and they say nothing to Mme. Forestier
of their calamity.” Also distinctive of this summary is the repeated use of character names (other
summaries mostly or exclusively use generic terms like “the wife,” “the friend”) and the precise
(and for once accurate!) enumeration of money (the 36,000-franc loan is mentioned twice, as is
the necklace’s real 500-franc value). Both what’s included and left out of this summary already
prepare the way for the writer’s negative assessment of the story. On the one hand, the elision of
motive allows the writer to object that “In keeping [the necklace’s] disappearance a secret from
Mme. Forestier, the Loisels acted not as people act in real life, but as puppets act on the stage –
for a particular purpose of the author. […] if [the husband] had told Mme. Forestier at once there
would have been no story.” Whether prompted by malice, hasty reading or the dissolving power
of memory, the writer claims the characters’ act as they do only because of the author’s motives.
And while we can point to internal motivations specified within the text, Bennett’s complaint
here captures the strong sense of authorial agency that many others also discussed.

This alleged lack of motive opens out onto the over-arching criticism of the story, which
focuses on its ending. Bennett complained that “probability and truth are sacrificed to the
artificial necessity of a climax,” delivering a “smashing blow between the reader’s eyes” and that

330 Bennett.
all considerations of truth and genuine art are ignored in order that the reader may be
dazzled by the swift flash of a magnesium light, deluded by a conjuring trick, laid
flat by a single blow. The inexcusable fault of the tale is that it depends on a mere
trick, a device hit on in a chance moment, and executed for the delectation of the
groundlings and the obfuscation of the weak in judgment.\footnote{331}

The evident snobbery here is rare in newspapers of the time, and perhaps is a bridge to
the elite aesthetic discussions to be found in the more exclusive weekly and monthly reviews in
which this piece originated. Whereas the previous writer even-handedly wondered about the
aesthetic value of the momentarily electrifying vs the sustainedly puzzling, for Bennett art that is
over in a “swift flash” is mere fodder for the simple-minded.

Despite the negative assessment, Bennett’s article notably shares the premise of the many
other articles we’ve examined that “‘The Necklace’ is the prototype of the very modern short
story.” Bennett goes so far as to claim that “Nine-tenths of all magazine stories depend for their
effect on a trick plot” and that “unless a story possesses this trickiness the editors complain that it
has no plot.” Bennett was writing before O. Henry’s breakthrough, and it’s unclear whether a
“trick plot” is necessarily a plot twist – I suspect it’s a broader category that also goes by the
name “surprise ending,” but, regardless, the exemplarity of “The Necklace” specifically for its
plot is not in question.

Indeed, this discussion of “The Necklace” concludes by moving smoothly from its plot to
plot itself, with Bennett lamenting that “the meaning of the term ‘plot’ has been ridiculously
narrowed, and the short story has become a weird monstrosity with a distended climax, to which

\footnote{331} Perhaps to demonstrate what a “truthful” ending would be, the writer also offered one of the most
detailed fanfic continuations to the story’s existing ending: “Obviously, therefore, Mme. Forestier would
dispose of the jewels, buy herself a paste necklace and hand the balance to the Loisels: and the balance,
even allowing for jeweller’s profits, would perhaps be not less than 30,000 francs. In Paris 30,000 francs
is a great deal, and the Loisels would have been to some extent, if far from adequately, compensated for
their privations.”
every other part of its organism is absolutely subservient.” In this final moment there emerges
the organicist aesthetics whose ideal literary work is modelled on a living “organism,” with each
part in proportion and all parts constituting a well-formed whole. From Coleridge to George
Eliot to Woolf, organicism has tended to be an elite conception of art, and Maupassant’s “The
Necklace,” and the large numbers of short stories for mass readership that followed in its
footsteps, could not satisfy organicist ideals (but perhaps also weren’t trying to).332 And whereas
organicist aesthetics increasingly disparaged plot as a literary element that shouldn’t dominate
the others, and perhaps shouldn’t be there at all, for the popular short story, plot, and especially
this plot of “The Necklace,” proved generative.

3.2 How to Write a Short Story: “The Necklace” as Model

Bennett’s claim that nine-tenths of all magazine short stories of the time depended on a
Necklace-inspired “trick plot” was no doubt an exaggeration, but the production of short stories
modelled on “The Necklace” was a real phenomenon. In this section I turn to an important
mechanism by which this replication and adaptation of the Necklace plot occurred: fiction
writing manuals. This section investigates how summaries, retellings and other kinds of
abstractions from the plot of “The Necklace” functioned to bridge the gap between existing
stories and subsequent short-story writing.

This section won’t offer a comprehensive overview of fiction writing manuals in
general.333 Instead, I track “The Necklace” through its appearances in these works, much as I

332 Cf. Shuttleworth.
tracked its appearances in newspapers in the previous section. I’ll first offer a few words about fiction writing manuals to situate the analysis to come. First, these manuals emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and multiplied dramatically in the early twentieth century. Their rise is evidently closely associated with the growth of the market for short stories, in turn linked to the dramatic rise in the number of magazines. As such, the manuals are all avowedly commercial in orientation: while they certainly speak of “art,” their promise is to teach readers how to write a story that will sell. Reinforcing this promise, they typically insist that fiction writing is a learnable skill, not a product of innate genius, and that there are specific rules, methods and practices that can facilitate (though not guarantee) literary success. While there’s variation in how different manuals treat the topic of plot (some view it as the core of a successful short story, others insist that plot and character or plot and tone must work in concert), I have found none of the anti-plot sentiment that characterizes elite novel aesthetics from Flaubert (Madame Bovary as “book about nothing”/“livre sur rien”) to Decadence to Modernism. While the twentieth century saw the rise of the plotless short story, often explicitly contrasted with the bad old plotted nineteenth-century short story, at the turn of the century these manuals still treated plot as an unmissable element.

In this section, I outline three strategies by which these manuals detached the plot of “The Necklace” from the text of “The Necklace,” thus making it available for aspiring short-story

334 Cf. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, Slow Print.

writers as a model for their own use. These strategies are the quotation, the diagram and the summary.

3.2.1 Quotation

Some manuals quoted all or part of “The Necklace,” with or without commentary. The lowest-intervention version of this practice was to quote the entire story without commentary, as did one manual which promised to “name […] a few of the great stories and collections” that focus on the “conjunction of characters and events,” before citing “The Necklace” along with nine other titles and going on to reprint only “The Necklace” among those listed.\(^{336}\) The story isn’t accompanied by any direct commentary, but it does follow several pages of general advice about managing tone, depicting characters and making sure every sentence “lead[s] toward” the “climax.”\(^{337}\) We might think a verbatim reprinting of the full text represents no intervention at all, but the preliminary framing here cues quite different reading practices from those expected of people who encountered the story in a newspaper, in Maupassant’s collection *The Odd Number* or in an anthology of great short stories. Readers of this manual must do the work of connecting the general advice with the specific example that follows, and this involves an analytical and abstracting approach to the words on the page.

A more obvious intervention through quotation were the manuals that quoted only selected portions of “The Necklace.” One manual told its readers, “Let us take the opening


\(^{337}\) Fansler, p. 459.
paragraph of ‘The Necklace’ and see what a marvel of contrast it is,” before quoting the paragraph and proceeding to analyze it. Readers were invited to read the quoted passage for a generalizable lesson about the value of “contrast,” in particular in the opening sentences of a story. The manual then went on to trace the use of contrast through the rest of the story, in a mixture of plot summary (“Her hopes are satisfied completely, it appears, until suddenly…”) and carefully selected and juxtaposed quotations. The presentation of “The Necklace” concludes with the observation that “at the end comes the short, sharp contrast of paste and diamonds.” While the focus here is not exclusively on plotting, nonetheless the sequential presentation and combination of quotation with summary links the abstracted lesson about “contrast” directly to the plot of “The Necklace.”

The most elaborate use of quotation to detach lessons in plotting from “The Necklace” occurred in a manual that reprinted the entirety of “The Necklace” with marginal commentary alongside, as illustrated in Figure 1.


339 Cody, p. 132.

340 Cody, p. 133.
buy a gun and treat himself to a little summer shooting on the plain of Nanterre, with several friends who went to shoot larks down there, on Sundays.

28. But he said:

29. “All right. I will give you four hundred francs. And try to have a pretty dress.”

30. The day of the ball drew near, and Mme. Loisel seemed sad, uneasy, anxious. Her dress was ready, however. Her husband said to her one evening:

31. “What is the matter? Come, you’ve been very queer these last three days.”

32. And she replied:

33. “It annoys me to have not a single jewel, not a single stone, nothing...”

Local color. Scarcely any in this story.
Thoughtless and dense, but not really selfish.

End of Minor Crisis.
This entire incident not only reveals character but lays the foundation for the main crisis.

FURTHER FOUNDATION FOR MAIN CRISIS.

Figure 1. Excerpt from Esenwein, p. 330

As this image makes clear, the commentary includes aspects other than plot, such as setting and characterization, but plot elements are given unique importance in being the only ones to be presented in capital letters. As Figure 2 shows, commentary on the notorious final sentence of “The Necklace” is surprisingly spare.
moved, took her two hands.

128. “Oh, my poor Mathilde! Why, my necklace was paste. It was worth at most five hundred francs!”

Climax, denouement, and conclusion.

Denouement forecast in ¶ 90.

Naturally, Mme. Forestier returned the jewels, but the ten years could not be returned, nor all they cost and wrought. Maupassant is too wise to tell a word of this.

Figure 2. Excerpt from Esenwein, p. 339

The all-caps formatting disappears, and the abstract categories of “Climax, denouement and conclusion” are simply listed. Notable also is the inclusion of speculation about events beyond the end of the story, which we’ve also seen in some newspaper articles. This final annotation extends spatially below the final words of the story, registering its status as inference rather than commentary, and suggesting that the plot of “The Necklace” comprises not only textually locatable written elements but also further speculations it prompts in readers.

In conclusion, quotation in these manuals, whether of part or all of “The Necklace,” did not serve the initial purpose of those words as Maupassant wrote them, namely to engage readers of fiction, but instead served to demonstrate that even at the scale of phrases and sentences, “The Necklace” was a model from which other writers could draw generalizable lessons, including in particular generalizable lessons about preparing successfully for a twist ending.341

3.2.2 Diagram

Some manuals diagrammed “The Necklace,” producing a visual rather than a verbal plot summary. The manual discussed above as combining quotation and summary also elsewhere used diagrams to represent the plot of various stories, including “The Necklace,” as shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Excerpt from Cody, unnumbered page between pp. 46 and 47](image)

Initially I took this diagram to be illustrating the doubling of the illusory and real events (or put another way, the distinct but parallel understandings of first-time readers vs rereaders). In fact, the writer explains that the two horizontal lines represent the respective social statuses of Mathilde and her husband. Nonetheless, these diagrams still abstract the plot, in that the couple’s social status rises and falls in response to plot events like the “Ball,” “loss of Neck.” and the revelation that the original jewels were “paste.” Much like the earlier manual which extended its commentary below the end of the story, here the writer extended the diagram beyond the end of what’s depicted in the story:

What happened after that we are not told, but we may imagine their rising to their former level, but probably not so high after ten years of depressing work, and going
on smoothly to the end. That is only supposition, however, and is indicated by dotted lines.\textsuperscript{342}

Once again these abstractions of the plot from “The Necklace” not only summarize what’s there in the story but also unwritten plot points readers are invited to speculate about.

A manual that claimed that “The reader of short stories expects, nowadays, the surprise ending” went on to cite “The Necklace” as one of two “classics” of the device, before insisting that “this dénouement is but an instance of a general method.”\textsuperscript{343} This “method” is in turn “represented in diagram,” shown here as Figure 4.

\textsuperscript{342} Cody, p. 48.

\textsuperscript{343} Blanche Colton Williams, \textit{A Handbook on Story Writing} (Dodd, Mead, 1917), pp. 262, 263.
of Goliath must of necessity be a giant. O. Henry repeated this surprise trick in “October and June.” Gouverneur Morris played with it entertainingly in “Suffrage in the Wildwood.” The method may be represented in diagram:

\[ 
\begin{align*}
A & \quad Z \\
& \quad \downarrow \\
& \quad Z' \\
& \quad \downarrow \\
& \quad C \\
\end{align*}
\]

A Z is the course of the story as the author devised it. But the reader falling upon a false clue at C, let us say, a clue derived for the most part from his reliance on the hackneyed, constructs the story in his own manner, and foresees an ending at Z'. He receives a shock on leaping from Z' to Z!

*Figure 4. Excerpt from Williams, p. 271*

This is in fact the diagram that I thought the previous manual was offering, in which the divergent understanding of a character/first-time reader and the real events is depicted as diverging lines, which converge at the very end. This diagram is notably a generalized one: it represents a “method” of which “The Necklace” is only one prominent example. The next page reinforces the exemplarity of “The Necklace,” offering another diagram (Figure 5) which transitions smoothly into a plot summary of Maupassant’s story.
been withheld. Plot, order and method of narration are both responsible for the shock. If A B C, and so on, down to Z, represent the regular sequence of events, then an important point—represented by any letter—may be deferred and placed after Z. Thus:

A.........................Z (N).

This is the method which is most outstanding in “The Necklace,” in O. Henry’s “Double Dyed Deceiver,” and in Jacobs’s “The Third String.” The former as the pioneer deserves attention. Madame Loisel borrowed from Madame Forestier a diamond necklace. Having lost it, she replaced it with an-

Figure 5. Excerpt from Williams, p. 272

What the diagrams in this manual illustrate is that the plot of “The Necklace” could undergo multiple levels of abstraction, sometimes retaining specificities of the characters, setting and events even within the diagram, other times reduced to highly schematic letters and lines. Most importantly, these levels of abstraction interacted with each other: as with the combination of quotation and summary in the previous section, here we see manuals moving readers between these levels as they learn to take “The Necklace” as a model for their own plots.

A brief aside: the same manual also earlier diagrammed O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi,” which I include here (Figure 6) as another example of diagramming a twist narrative.
tical value. Jim has sold his watch to obtain a pair of combs, whereas Della has cut off her hair to secure money for the fob. In other stories the author repeated the general nature of the plot with equal success. (See Exercises.)

The plot may be represented by the diagram:

That is, at M Della sells her hair; at S she buys the fob; at M' Jim sells his watch; at S' he buys the combs.

There is a direct link between M and S' (the selling of the hair and the buying of the combs), and between M' and S (the selling of the watch and the buying of the fob). It is this connection which labels such a story as one of "cross-purposes."

It should be noticed that in the story presentation, only the dénouement reveals that the previous "cross" exists.

AZ represents Della's struggle, in which she is successful; A'Z' represents Jim's struggle, in which he is successful. The climax of action for each is the presentation of the gifts.

The preceding examples should make clear that entanglement or complication results from a use of two or more lines of interest. What is the value of

Figure 6. Excerpt from Williams, p. 74
While the diagrams discussed so far were presented readymade to readers, diagramming plot was also an activity that manuals encouraged readers themselves to practice. One manual offered a diagram of another Maupassant story, “The Piece of String” (see Figure 7), and then in its “Suggestions for study,” instructed readers to “mak[e] a plot analysis, representing the action by a diagram and accompanying explanatory notes, for two or three stories recently read” and added that “the beginner should try Maupassant’s The Necklace.” Here the instruction is explicit, but we could imagine aspiring short-story writers who were told by any of these manuals that “The Necklace” was exemplary, outstanding, technically perfect, deciding for themselves to diagram its plot.

Figure 7. Excerpt from Cross, p. 57

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While the many verbal summaries we’ve seen abstract the plot of “The Necklace,” the translation into visual terms of these plot diagrams makes the abstraction especially tangible. These diagrams show “The Necklace” becoming a literal blueprint for future plot twists.

3.2.3 Summary

Of the reductive, abstracting treatments of the plot of “The Necklace” in writing manuals, summaries were the most frequent. We’ve already seen verbal summary occurring alongside quotations and diagrams in the previous section, but it also frequently appeared alone.

One manual devoted an entire chapter titled “The Short-Story and its Essentials” to a sustained analysis of “The Necklace.” The chapter begins by itemizing some general principles: “A Singleness of Impression,” “A Well-Defined Plot,” “A Dominent Incident,” “A Preëminent Character” and “A Complication and its Resolution,” before proposing to “examine a short-story plot embodying the foregoing essentials.” What follows is a one-paragraph, 198-word summary of “The Necklace,” and this in turn is followed by a brief point-by-point explanation of how the story exemplifies the five criteria (“The ‘Complication’ is the loss of the Necklace” etc.) before concluding that “Technically, ‘The Necklace’ is a perfect short-story.” While the summary here was presented without comment, the act of summarizing as a way to generate plot was evoked explicitly several times in the “Questions and Exercises” that followed immediately afterwards, and which included


5. Write out the plots of two short-stories and then say how they do or do not show the five essentials mentioned in this chapter. […]

11. Invent an original plot for a short-story and state it in not more than three hundred words.  

We’re close to the coal face of literary production here, and we can observe that summarizing plot was important for writers both as something to do with existing stories and as a starting point for a story of one’s own.

Summaries, like diagrams, varied in their level of abstraction from the source. The aforementioned manual which combined quotation with relatively detailed plot summary of “The Necklace” also elsewhere offered a much more compressed, abstracted summary: “a woman made a prodigious sacrifice for something which turned out far less valuable than she had imagined.” The context here is revealing: the writer is speculating, in a section on drawing inspiration for stories from real life incidents, that Maupassant “doubtless heard some story” that inspired “The Necklace.” A dizzying hall of mirrors comes into view here, where even “The Necklace” itself is not the original story, but merely one very successful iteration of a highly abstract plot where “a woman” sacrifices far too much for “something” that turns out to be worthless. And even though this summary in the manual is not explicitly offered as a template for other writers to adapt, its extreme abstraction means it’s readymade for writers to flesh out with their own details, just as Maupassant himself supposedly did.

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347 Esenwein and Chambers, pp. 110, 111.

348 Cody, p. 31.
As with diagramming, summarizing was not only done by the writers of these manuals but also pressed on readers as a valuable exercise. One manual in fact twice encouraged readers to summarize “The Necklace”: the manual featuring the two-column quotation plus commentary followed up with the instruction to “Write out a brief scenario of the plot” of “The Necklace,” and in another chapter, on the importance of compression and appropriate length, asks readers to “Try the effect of still further condensing Maupassant’s The Necklace.” Moving smoothly between a full story, a plot summary and back again to a full story was a habit of mind these manuals consistently cultivated.

The manuals did not, however, suggest that a plot summary and a short story were interchangeable, nor that summaries should be objects of aesthetic contemplation. One manual, in the midst of a discussion of “clever” surprising dénouements (which namechecks Maupassant), warned aspiring writers that “The outline of the greatest story might read like the bald sentences of a primer” and that “the plot cannot be separated from the story as a whole” except “for purposes of analysis.” Similarly, the manual discussed in the paragraph above, in a section titled “The Short-Story Is Not a Scenario, or Synopsis” notes that “such a skeleton […] lack[s] red blood” and is “uninteresting, if not actually repellent.” The paragraph concludes: “Compression is essential, but it will not do to squeeze a story to death.” Later, the same manual warned that


The story must not be pared down to the skeleton proportions of The Telegrapher’s Biography:

Monday: Hired.
Tuesday: Wired.
Wednesday: Tired.
Thursday: Fired.  

I’m reminded of the apocryphal “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” and find this all quite delightful. For now, I want in particular to emphasise the “skeleton” metaphor, which will return in the next section.

In sum, then, writing manuals used techniques of quotation, diagram and summary to make the plot of “The Necklace” reusable by other short-story writers. While they did not claim the skeleton was identical to a fleshed-out story, readers of any of these manuals came away with the sense that forming stories around an existing skeleton was the way to go, and that “The Necklace” had good bones.

3.3 Stories After “The Necklace”: Reworking, Reference, Metafiction

If we judge by the newspaper articles claiming nine-tenths of all short stories contained a Necklace-esque twist and the manuals telling aspiring writers to model their stories on “The Necklace,” there are countless long-forgotten stories to be uncovered in newspaper and magazine archives that silently rework Maupassant’s story. This section does not present such stories: finding these stories would require very different kinds of archival detective work from what I have been able to do, and any connection to “The Necklace” would necessarily be entirely speculative. Instead, I turn in this final section to two stories that within their own fictional

352 Esenwein, p. 295.
worlds explicitly cite “The Necklace,” summarize its plot and use it to generate new narratives for their own characters.\textsuperscript{353}

I’ll note beforehand that neither of these two works is straightforwardly a “short story,” for reasons I’ll explain. I’ll therefore use “story” as a neutral term to refer to these two texts.

Mabel Herbert Urner’s column \textit{Their Married Life} was a serialized account of a married couple, Helen and Warren. The column was syndicated in “over one hundred newspapers in the United States, Canada and Great Britain” and was at least partially autobiographical.\textsuperscript{354} Individual instalments have the episodic quality of standalone short stories, and in an instalment that appeared in \textit{The Washington Post} on November 21st, 1913 (and then again in the \textit{Spokane Daily Chronicle} on May 27th, 1914), Helen borrows a pearl pendant from a friend, loses it, and then “The Necklace” makes a cameo appearance:

\begin{quote}
Two other short stories I don’t discuss, but whose relationship to “The Necklace” is demonstrable, though more complicated, are Henry James’s “Paste” and Maupassant’s own “Les Bijoux.”\textsuperscript{353} James’s story reverses the twist of “The Necklace,” in that jewelry thought to be mere paste eventually prove to be the genuine article. James’s letters and his preface to the \textit{New York Edition} attest to “Paste” being a conscious attempt to “transpos[e] the terms” of “The Necklace.” Yet recent scholarship has also shown that James was also, perhaps unconsciously, rewriting another Maupassant story: “Les Bijoux.” (Philip Horne, ‘Strings of Pearls: James, Maupassant, and “Paste”,’ \textit{Literary Imagination}, 21.2 (2019), 137–57 (p. 140).) Germane to my interests are the fact that in communicating with the French translator of “Paste,” James stated that he’d imagined his story to be a “free translation” (“traduction libre”) of Maupassant, only to discover now that it was not easily translatable “back” into French. The article I cite in this note also interprets “Paste” (and particularly the paste and jewelry within the story) as “allegorically, an emblem of literary transmission,” and of how Maupassant’s story “seemed to James to demand rewriting – reawakening in a new context, a new setting.” (Horne, pp. 154, 149.) Equally curious is Maupassant’s “Les Bijoux,” which like James’s “Paste” reversed the twist of “The Necklace” by having supposedly fake jewels prove real. The wrinkle here is that “Les Bijoux” was written \textit{before} “The Necklace.” That said, many Anglo-American readers might have encountered it \textit{after} reading (or knowing second-hand) about “The Necklace,” since, for example, it was reprinted in a \textit{San Francisco} newspaper as late as 1912.
\end{quote}

All morning Helen had been haunted with the thought of De Maupassant’s “The Necklace.” In this story the woman had lost her friend’s pearl necklace, and for twenty years both she and her husband slaved and starved to save the money to pay for it. And only to find in the end that the pearls had not been real, but merely a cheap composition! The best of their life had been wasted by this hideous mistake.  

This certainly marks a new degree of cultural saturation, when even fictional characters are referencing and summarizing “The Necklace.” Moreover, like the newspaper article connecting this fictional plot to real events, Helen compares and contrasts “The Necklace” with her own life.

It was consoling to think how much more overwhelming had been that tragedy. Yet the thought of paying a hundred and fifty dollars for a lost pearl that might not have been genuine almost drove Helen frantic.

Helen and her husband have reasons to suspect the pearl is fake, though the cost of paying for it won’t ruin them.

Helen has a sense of “a wretched fatality to the whole chain of events” concerning the pearl, which suggests something of the cultural associations “The Necklace” had come to acquire. And note that these associations depend on a thoroughly knowing, retrospective significance to “The Necklace.” The “fatality” of events is perceptible to Helen and to people bathed in the discourse about that particular story, whereas it is not perceptible to Mathilde or to first-time readers. This implicit rereaderly stance is reinforced when Helen is described as feeling “a morbid desire to reread ‘The Necklace.’”

__________________________


356 Whether authorial error or subtle characterization, the summary includes several mistakes: the diamonds become pearls, and ten years become twenty.
Just as she’s about to reread it, Helen’s own plot resumes. Various convolutions follow in swift succession: the maid finds the pearl, Helen takes it to a jeweler, it proves real but “just an ordinary American pearl” worth $50. Helen had, however, already told her friend she wanted to buy the pearl for $150 to avoid the embarrassment of admitting she lost it. Then, unexpectedly, Helen’s friend insists she wants the pearl back. Helen returns it, but wonders whether to tell her friend what she knows of the pearl’s real value. Helen’s husband has the last word:

“[…] She’s made up her mind she wants this geegaw […]. So it’s not for you to interfere. You’re blamed lucky to get out of it – now stay out! Understand?”

The story thus ends with a twist of its own, in which the initial question of whether Helen would get scammed on a fake pearl proves to be misguided: it is the pearl’s previous owner who has been the victim of a scam. This story which began with a rereading of “The Necklace” thus ends with a figure of the first-time twist reader: a character who doesn’t even suspect that all along the situation has not been what it seems. While “The Necklace” is not referenced again by name at the end, it didn’t need to be. For readers of the time, a twist meant “The Necklace” and “The Necklace” meant a twist.357

Urner’s story might be said to apply the soft pedal to everything that was unsettling about the twist of “The Necklace.” The sums of money are far smaller, the risk of disaster is minimal, and even Helen recognizes that her counterpart Mathilde’s fate was “much more overwhelming” than anything she might experience. In addition, this story’s existence as part of a long-running chronicle of married life mitigates the sense that anything seriously bad will happen. Helen and

357 The 1914 Spokane reprint of this instalment added the subheading “Think of ‘The Necklace.’” before the first passage quoted above. This editorial amendment made the evocation of “The Necklace” even more of a selling point: skimming the newspaper pages, this line stood out visually and might have helped draw readers in who would otherwise skip.
Warren’s life must more or less reset, sitcom-like, at the end of each instalment. Furthermore, the metafictional flourish of evoking “The Necklace” does not unsettle the diegetic stability of the surrounding story: on the contrary, it reinforces the sense that Helen is just like us in knowing and occasionally thinking about “The Necklace.”

The second story to which I now turn mobilizes the plot of “The Necklace” to deeply destabilizing effect. Jack Lait’s “Stranger Than Truth” appeared in the Chicago Daily Tribune on February 3rd, 1918. Lait had by then been a reporter on the Chicago crime beat since around 1904, and in 1915 had “started writing a daily true story and established several fictitious [...] characters who ran through his stories for many years.”358 Blurring truth and fiction seemed to have become Lait’s specialty, and the item in question – printed in the “Fiction” section of the paper and sandwiched between short stories and serialized novels – begins with an explicit reflection on the topic.

The author (or should we say narrator?) opens with a complaint that “Folks are continually flagging me” to offer “truthful tales which they hold forth as offering bonanzas of ‘Material’ for a stumbling mummer like myself, who must be hard put to ‘think out’ plots and characters.”359 We are evidently in the modus operandi of the fiction-writing manuals, with their extensive advice on how to “think out” plots and characters based on news reports, real incidents and of course other fictional stories. Lait, however, brushes off these offerings with the aphoristic statement that “Fiction sounds just as true if it be true fiction.” Over several

paragraphs, Lait develops the idea that truth alone is no guarantor of a good story, before claiming:

I have never encountered an honest fact in incident which had not already been pre-imagined for fiction, just as, I doubt not, no one ever conceived a fancied combination of people and events that had not already happened in truth.

As we saw repeatedly in section 1, “The Necklace” was just such a fiction that “pre-imagined” numerous real-life incidents that followed. There was also the hint in section 2 that “The Necklace” was itself based on a real-life incident, or at least could have been. Lait’s reflections make this entanglement of the real and the fictional into a kind of cosmic principle.

If this is all getting too dizzying, the rest of the story is far more concretely situated. Lait moves into an anecdote of his “dear friend C. P., a brilliant professional writer,” who excitedly buttonholes Lait on a train to share an idea for a story. Lait assumes this will be another misguided offering of a real-life incident, but C. P. reassures him that “This story is not true” but he instead

...got it through a chain of thought that began when I read De Maupassant’s “The Necklace” some nights ago. I raved over it; I think it’s the greatest short story ever written. I got to thinking that such things must really happen often. That, to me, is the peak of fiction, when it makes me cogitate on truth

C. P. elaborates that “I got thinking about ‘The Necklace,’ and got to applying its dramatic method to local matter. [...] Now I have a story all fixed up, using De Maupassant’s bag of tools on American people and affairs.” Again, although writing manuals aren’t mentioned, the notion that “The Necklace” has a transferrable “method,” and Maupassant a “bag of tools” others can use, shares the manuals' conception of literary production. C. P. continues to speak the language of the manuals when he tells Lait “Here’s my skeleton: you can drape the flesh of your vocabulary, your skin epigrams, and a hair or two of your own kind of thin comedy on it”
before launching into the manuals’ characteristic practice of summary: “Man is arrested, charged
with murder; faithful wife turns heaven and earth, with all the customary details and then some,
to get him reprieved…” Even schematically, this plot is evidently not identical to the plot of
“The Necklace,” though it shares the plot point of a woman engaged in “a devotion as long as
and much more tragic than the one in ‘The Necklace,’ which meant only going without
luxuries.” The summary ends with the woman’s husband “freed” when “along comes a taxicab
and – kills him!”

This is a shocking surprise ending, but not a twist. “Isn’t it a big plot?” C. P. asks, but
Lait retorts that the ending is “unexpected, all right” but “doesn’t hold water”: “Taxis never kill
with dramatic intent. The drivers of taxis have no sense of climax. […] why lay all that beautiful
foundation for a taxi accident […]?” Instead, Lait proposes to tell C. P. a “truth […] that’s twice
as good as that yarn. In truth it is that yarn – only it has a much better finish, a much more logical
finish.”

From the start of this supposedly true story of Lait’s, which will constitute the remaining
half of the piece, readers receive hints that the story might be too good to be true. The parallels
between his story, C. P.’s “skeleton” and “The Necklace” are implausibly close:

“The start of my story […] is strangely like that of your own. The whole story, until
the very end, follows yours rather closely, except that there is one added character,
and that the end is all different. The end isn’t so different after all, maybe.”

If we take seriously C. P.’s earlier claim that “There isn’t a chance in a million” that his
story could really happen, then the chance of all three stories spontaneously occurring to the
three writers might be less than one in three million. It is at any rate vanishingly improbable.
Lait begins his story, however, with the claim of having eyewitness authenticity: “Some years ago, when I was a young reporter, I was assigned to ‘cover’ a murder trial…” The story that follows has far more local color than C. P.’s skeleton (characters have names and are described in detail; the settings and situations are vividly rendered) but is unmistakably following the same narrative beats. Indeed, there are intermittent verbatim echoes of C. P.’s skeleton so substantial as to be hard to miss (e.g. “at last – at last, mark you, after a devotion more tragic than the one in ‘The Necklace’ – saw him freed”). The effect of all this is diegetically unnerving: is Lait’s story a brilliant improvisation inspired by C. P.? Did Lait experience esprit d’escalier after ruminating on C. P.’s proffered outline, and then fictionalize himself coming up with it on the spot? Did the real Lait really experience these events, and if so did he fictionalize C. P. as a pretext to tell his own story within a more tantalizing frame? Are both C. P. and Lait’s story fictitious, simply illustrating the opening assertion that the truth rarely makes for a good story?

The one change to the plot comes, as promised, at the end. In this story, the husband isn’t hit by a taxi but instead absconds with “a young woman with a passion for listening to murder trials,” who had observed the years-long court sessions. Unlike C. P.’s skeleton, Lait’s story thus ends with a twist: a woman strives for years to free her beloved from prison, only to learn that all along he intended to pursue a relationship with someone else.

“Great story. Is it really true?” asked C. P.

“It is,” I answered. “And that’s the only thing that keeps it from being a truly great story.”

In a final flourish, Lait ends the frame narrative with something akin to the Cretan liar paradox. Some parts of what we’ve just read can’t possibly be true, and yet it’s hard to say
which. At the same time, readers are invited to think that less truth might be better: the “greater”
the story, the further it is from the truth.

Left floundering at this point, I find myself clinging to C. P.’s question “Isn’t it a big
plot?” Yes it is. Whatever else we may doubt about Lait’s story, the plot of “The Necklace” is
clearly a big one. Big both in the sense of a major achievement and in the sense of being a
capacious construction that can be readily expanded to fit, or generate, other stories. And what
remains consistent across the many iterations of this big plot, not only in “Stranger Than Truth”
but across all the examples in this chapter? The twist. C. P.’s skeleton here is the exception that
proves the rule: lacking a twist, it deviates from the big plot, prompting Lait to reconsolidate the
big plot with a new twist of his own.

Taken together, these stories by Urner and Lait bring the plot of “The Necklace” full
circle, demonstrating that its passage through a phase of highly-compressed summary actually
enabled the production of new fully-fledged works of fiction. And not just any works of fiction:
new twist narratives.

**Conclusion: The Reductiveness of Plot**

This chapter has examined avowedly reductive treatments of plot. A great literary work
has been repeatedly reduced to a few sentences of summary, to a diagram, to a brief mention in
another story. I want to conclude by reflecting on the potential value of reductiveness.

First, I must apologize to the Maupassant specialists, whose weary sighs I anticipate in
response to my focus on “The Necklace,” among all his stories. In my browsing of Maupassant
scholarship, I found repeated lamentations that “The Necklace” was treated as emblematic of
Maupassant’s entire oeuvre, when in fact it is “unrepresentative.” The specialists are tired of people thinking that Maupassant was a mere O. Henry, himself called “the Yankee Maupassant,” who churned out hundreds of twist narratives as though on an assembly line.361

The specialists are responding to a real misconception: “The Necklace” does indeed dominate Maupassant’s public image, and even his image among scholars in other fields. An


Beyond Maupassant, scholars of the short story have seemingly had a vexed relationship to the plot twist. On the one hand, in researching this chapter I found the first instances of literary scholars discussing plot twists in both historical and formal terms, which I have not found in scholarship on the novel. On the other hand, these scholars seem anxious to distance the short story from the low associations of the plot twist:

“At the end of the nineteenth century, the surprise ending in particular came to epitomise the type of pleasure readers came to expect from the genre. In the newspapers where the bulk of the stories were published at that time, hundreds of stories ended with a ‘twist-in-the-tail.’” (Florence Goyet, The Classic Short Story, 1870-1925: Theory of a Genre (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2014), p. 44.)

“Far from O. Henry’s simple trick endings, great stories with a “twist-in-the-tail” force us into some sort of a ‘retroreading’: a reconsideration of the entire text from its beginning.” (Goyet, The Classic Short Story, 1870-1925, p. 47.)

“To instance Maupassant here is to be forcibly reminded of the extent to which his example lies behind the type of O. Henry story being discussed: it was Maupassant’s name that writers of short-story manuals constantly invoked from the 1890s onwards. But as a comparison between O. Henry and his French predecessor demonstrates, the influence was not entirely beneficial, similarities being limited to the sphere of technique and narrative method. Few people would dispute that Maupassant’s celebrated story ‘The Necklace’ (1885) is superior to anything achieved by O. Henry, even though it resembles the American’s work in the way it depends on a plot which is conceived in terms of opposites and one major ironic reversal.” (Valerie Shaw, The Short Story: A Critical Introduction, [1983] 2013, p. 56.)

“a relish for the Final Twist as exemplified most notoriously in the writings of O. Henry, is particularly unfortunate since it has tended to provoke a reactive critical disparagement of all surprise endings, some of which are however not manipulative devices but ways of elucidating meanings latent in the whole narrative. Guy de Maupassant’s ‘La Parure’ (‘The Necklace’) exemplifies this.” (Reid, p. 60.)

Twists have evidently been especially important in the history of the short story, and “The Necklace” has been one of the key reference points.
aside in a book on Karl Marx, for example, calls the “terrible twist” of “The Necklace” “a Maupassant specialty.” It is not. Maupassant wrote hundreds of stories, only a handful of which contain a plot twist.

In this chapter I’ve chosen to approach this reductive understanding of Maupassant as a historically-specific object of study. My chapter in fact traces the earliest phase in the development of this reductive equation of Maupassant’s oeuvre with “The Necklace.” I want to view this historical phenomenon not as an obstacle to knowledge but as a condition of knowledge. What did this reductive picture of Maupassant as twist-maker extraordinaire allow people to know? What knowledge did it help to spread in the decades after “The Necklace” first appeared? As part of a longer pre-history of the plot twist, I want to make the case that this narrow focus on Maupassant’s “Necklace” helped spread knowledge of the plot twist as a recognizable, replicable device.363

This chapter has not extensively discussed, or contributed to, interpretations of the “The Necklace.” By interpretations I mean such questions as whether Mathilde’s misfortunes are


“tragic” or a “disguised blessing.” Interpretations concern the evaluation or symbolic understanding of events within a narrative, whereas I’m focused on something more basic: the events themselves, the “what” of a narrative. Varied and enriching as these interpretations are, they’re a second-order mental operation which builds on top of a simpler demand for readers to simply comprehend what happens. Comprehension of a story is usually substantially consistent from one reader to the next, while interpretation can be enormously varied (“I hated that character” “I loved that character” “I thought the ending was sappy” “I thought the ending was moving”) and has therefore undergirded a history of interpretive differentiation among scholars. This consistency among readers’ comprehension may have made the “what” of stories seem unpromising to literary scholars, yet in this chapter I’ve shown how a simple, even reductive, understanding of what happens in “The Necklace” allowed knowledge of this plot – and in particular of its twist construction – to circulate widely and reach not only many readers of the story but also people who never read it.

One argument for objecting to plot summaries is that they’re reductive. Indeed, all the methods for making plots portable I examine in this chapter – summary, abstraction/generalization, selective quotation, diagramming, retelling – can fairly be called reductive. While literary scholars have tended to view the act of summarizing and the textual genre of the summary as at best a necessary evil and at worst inimical to literariness itself, in this

364 Bernard Haezewindt, ‘La Parure de Guy de Maupassant Ou l’intrusion Du réalisme Du XIXe Siècle Dans Le Conte de Cendrillon,’ Nottingham French Studies, 44.2 (2005), 20–30 (p. 29); Reid, p. 61.

365 While some narratives certainly require extensive, perhaps never-ending, interpretation simply to answer the question of what happened (Ulysses and the nouveau roman come to mind), there is little ambiguity as to what happened by the end of “The Necklace.” We’re not invited to ponder whether Mme Forestier’s necklace might have been real after all. This is true of twist narratives in general, where the new understanding offered by the revelation is established as definitive.
chapter I’ve made the case that summaries and other reductive treatments of literary works are important mechanisms for their social circulation.366

Summary has a special importance – problematically so – for the history of the plot twist. The apparent readiness with which twist narratives can be summarized (‘he’s a ghost,’ ‘the narrator is the murderer,’ ‘it was all a dream,’ ‘he’s in love with X not Y’) reflects the unusually intense and clear-cut centrality that one small moment – the reveal – has in relation to readers’ perception of the work as a whole. You can summarize a twist narrative by summarizing the revelation because the revelation provides the lens through which the entire narrative must, by the end, be understood. Yet the ease with which people can generate summaries of twist narratives has also been turned against them, especially in scholarly and elite literary discourse, as evidence of their low aesthetic status. If a narrative can be summed up in a single sentence, the reasoning goes, it can’t be worth much: good literature is complex, referentially demanding and linguistically artful. In more recent times, the CliffsNotes industry, Masterplots and Reader’s

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For a recent argument that reductive reading, whether through transformation into digital data or simply reading with a specific goal in mind, can be generative of new insights, see Sarah Allison, Reductive Reading: A Syntax of Victorian Moralizing (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018). In the same vein, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller has argued that nineteenth-century publishers, journalists and readers valued the reductiveness of the book review as a tool for managing an overwhelming quantity of potential reading material. (Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, ‘Reading in Review.’) Other positively-connoted reductive practices for literary works include the excerpting and anthologizing detailed in Price’s The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel, and the making of commonplace books as an expression of love, taste and personal identity described in Lynch’s Loving Literature, 137-144. Another variation on reductive excerpting is the “prolonged excerpt” in Victorian book reviews studied by Nicholas Dames, ed. by Rachel Ablow, ‘On Not Close Reading: The Prolonged Excerpt as Victorian Critical Protocol,’ in The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 11–26. On the subject of book reviews, an equally reductive practice (though perhaps more congenial to literary scholars) is the early nineteenth-century focus on style over plot, as presented in Amanpal Garcha, From Sketch to Novel: The Development of Victorian Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
Digest publications as well as the rise of Wikipedia have all reinforced the sense that a summary is an overly convenient, second-rate shortcut compared to reading the work of literature itself. The status of plot summaries also intersects with the rise of the “spoiler alert,” and the sense that knowing the outline of a plot beforehand would spoil the experience, or even put potential audiences off entirely. Twist narratives suffer doubly, then, from their summarizability: critically disparaged on one side, and on the other susceptible to pre-emptive spoiling by those who might otherwise enjoy a good twist.

Yet even those who maintain that plot summary is anathema to literary reading or literary scholarship must recognize that not only are literary works summarizable, they’re constantly being summarized, whether we like it or not. As the many summaries of “The Necklace” have shown, certain works may also sustain plot summary better than others. This doesn’t make these summary-sustaining works better or worse overall, but it does make consideration of their afterlife in summary form a more relevant question for their reception. A Monty Python sketch depicting the “All-England Summarize Proust Competition,” ridiculous as it is, does not mean that every attempt at plot summary is as laughable.

This chapter has investigated a gray area between reading and not reading. Do people who read summaries, see diagrams or encounter quotations derived from “The Necklace” count as having “read” it? Does it count as rereading if someone has read the full text and then

367 Fessenbecker makes a similar point about literary works’ varied capacity to be paraphrased. He quotes an analogy made by Noël Carroll: “‘the intended capacity of locomotion under its own power’ […] However, this does not entail that the only way ’to appreciate any motor vehicle is in terms of its capacity to locomote… The ability to sustain mortar fire is pertinent when it comes to armored cars, but not family cars.” (Fessenbecker, 122)

368 Beyond literature, my thinking here has been shaped by video game creator and scholar Robert Yang, who declares that “To ‘consume’ a game, it is no longer necessary to play it.” (Robert Yang, ‘Not a
encounters the plot again in one of these reductive formats? This raises broader questions about what counts as literary knowledge: does only knowledge derived from first-hand experience count? What value do we attribute to second-hand knowledge? In this chapter I’ve made the case that second-hand knowledge does constitute an important part of literary history. In doing so, I want to broaden disciplinary assumptions about who is considered to be a producer or possessor of literary knowledge. While contributors to and readers of newspapers in the period under consideration were by no means demographically all-inclusive, by focusing on them in this chapter I’ve aimed to offer a more democratic, or, perhaps more precisely, collective account of literary knowledge. Looking beyond the authority of authors and prestigious critics (Sainte-Beuve, say), I want to insist on the collective achievements of a much larger group of writers and readers to understand new things about literature. Whatever we may come to know about the plot twist now is less because we’re standing on the shoulders of giants and more because we’re surfing on this crowd.

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Manifesto; on Game Development as Cultural Work,’ Radiator Design Blog, 2015.) Instead, “For the vast majority of the world,” games “live as thought experiments or imagined games, not memories of actual experiences.” He concludes with several provocations: “what if some games functioned better as cultural hearsay? What if you designed a game TO BE hearsay?” Similarly, “The Necklace” functioned extremely well as “cultural hearsay” in the decades after publication.

For a contrasting position from the nineteenth century, see Wilkie Collins’s request to reviewers not to tell the author’s “story at second-hand” because they will be “destroying, beforehand, two main elements in the attraction of all stories – the interest of curiosity, and the excitement of surprise.” Wilkie Collins, ed. by John Sutherland, The Woman in White, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 644-6.

Chapter 4. The Pre-Reading Environment: Ackroyd and the Cultural Management of Endings

Introduction: What to Expect When You’re (not) Expecting

Once the plot twist became a known quantity, it became newly urgent to manage what potential readers, before reading a work, did and did not know. When merely mentioning the word “twist” could act as a kind of spoiler, limiting readers’ knowledge of a twist was a necessary precondition for a work’s success. People had written and read twists well before the twentieth century. What changed in the early twentieth century, then, was the development of a new culture for managing readers’ prior knowledge of a twist narrative.

The mechanism of this cultural management I call a “pre-reading environment.” By this term I aim to capture something we all experience so constantly that it largely passes unnoticed. The pre-reading environment encompasses a book review of *A Little Life* that cues you to expect tragedy and abuse. It encompasses a book’s cover and blurb that signal whether its contents will be fantasy, or chick lit, or true crime. It encompasses the headline of an online article that begins “Let’s talk about that shocking scene in…” for a movie or tv show you haven’t yet watched. It encompasses a joke about trains in a stand-up set that alerts you to *Anna Karenina*’s sticky end. It encompasses a radio show that discusses the plot setup and themes of a new novel with its author (even if, especially if, you don’t listen to the whole thing or come in halfway through). More complicatedly, it encompasses the *Simpsons* parody of *Rear Window* that led many people around my age to watch the Hitchcock movie expecting the twist that the apparent crime had an innocent explanation. The pre-reading environment doesn’t guarantee

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369 Portions of this chapter appear in “What We Can(’t) Know Before We Read: Towards a Theory of the Pre-Reading Environment,” forthcoming from *PMLA.*
what any given individual will know about a specific work of fiction, but it constitutes the range of information they might, with varying degrees of probability, come to acquire.

The pre-reading environment for a work that hinges on a twist is a particularly delicate one. Even to mention that there’s a twist can act as a kind of spoiler, making potential readers feel there’s now no point in reading (and if they do read, putting them in a heightened state of suspicion). But a pre-reading environment can be more than just defensive: it can also preemptively shape expectations for the work in ways that will be most advantageous to it, and in particular that will help make the twist as effective as possible. This chapter focuses on Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as a prime example of a twist that benefited from the construction of a sophisticated pre-reading environment. Like the novel itself, the pre-reading environment placed enough clues inconspicuously in plain sight so that readers would be attracted to the book, read it with relatively vague expectations, be surprised by the twist and yet feel in retrospect a pleasing sense of having been tricked but not actively lied to.

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*Ackroyd’s* twist has become legendary. And like most legends, the facts haven’t been allowed to get in the way of a good story.

An essay by Caroline Crampton published on the official Agatha Christie website criticizes the “persistent myth” that the initial “readers and critics alike felt cheated by the book’s magnificent central twist” and “that there was a backlash,” “with people angry with [Christie] for so comprehensively pulling the rug out from under them”. On the contrary, the essay insists

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“critics have always been very complimentary about the novel’s plot, form and structure.”
Ironically enough, the legend of the twist’s reception is a kind of anti-twist, belatedly crafting new illusions that reverse what really happened.

The outrage myth looms large in the pre-reading environment for Ackroyd today. The myth relies on and reinforces the reductive treatment of plot that I discussed in Ch.3. The narrator did it: reduced to a one-line spoiler, the purported outrage seems disproportionate, and gives most readers today a protective buffer of knowingness when encountering the work, even for the first time. Implicitly or explicitly, the myth is accompanied by a healthy dose of condescension to the past: those first readers were so naive, innocent and narratologically unsophisticated that the Ackroyd twist hit them like a ton of bricks, whereas we appreciate it as an ingenious classic, or perhaps even as a cliché. Yet, as plot twists themselves demonstrate, the benefit of hindsight is really a “curse” when it comes to studying how this construction works.371 By reconstructing the novel’s initial pre-reading environment, I hope to understand better the knowledge and expectations (including gaps therein) which readers brought to the novel in 1926. They were more “innocent” readers than us not simply because the novel was new and its twist unprecedented, but because a complex pre-reading environment was created to maximize the twist’s surprise and (contrary to the myth) satisfaction. Innocent readers aren’t born but made.

The outrage myth is received wisdom not only in the sense of being potentially less than true, but also in the sense of being quite literally received by people from their surroundings. My use of the word “knowledge” when discussing pre-reading environments does not imply any truth value to the information circulating about a work of literature. Beyond the circulation of the

371 Tobin, Elements of Surprise.
outrage myth, it’s noteworthy that today’s pre-reading environment for Ackroyd is relatively unregulated when it comes to spoilers: while some individuals might come to the novel with absolutely no prior knowledge, others will already have had the twist spoiled for them, and many will at least be aware that there is a (particularly mind-blowing) twist.

This chapter contains three sections. The first presents Ackroyd’s twist in more detail, focusing on the narrator’s demonstration of his own earlier “judicious use of words” which had allowed his guilt to stay hidden while not outright lying. The second section gives a theoretical overview of pre-reading environments and its essential features. The third section turns to the pre-reading environment of Ackroyd, examining the “judicious use of words” that reviewers used to manage how information circulated about the novel’s twist. In this section, Virginia Woolf’s novel Mrs Dalloway will serve as a point of comparison, offering illuminating contrasts and parallels with that of Ackroyd.

4.1 Ackroyd’s “Judicious Use of Words”

My focus in this chapter is less on the novel than on the discourse that surrounded and, from the perspective of early readers, preceded it. First, however, I need to offer some more details about the novel’s twist, and the “judicious use of words” used to keep it concealed until the final revelation.

Dr Sheppard, a doctor in a small English village, begins his account with the suicide of Mrs Ferrars: she was being blackmailed for having killed her husband, and before her death wrote a letter to her new lover Roger Ackroyd revealing the blackmailer’s identity. Before Ackroyd can read the letter he is found murdered, the letter gone. Famed Belgian detective Poirot has moved to the quiet village in his retirement, but is soon drawn in to investigate, and recruits Sheppard as his sidekick. At the end of the novel, Poirot accuses Sheppard himself of
being the blackmailer and murderer, and Sheppard, knowing that the game is up, ends his own life with the same poison Mrs Ferrars used to end hers.

By making the one whodunit the narrator, Christie crafted a twist which could provide a sudden, shocking reversal, but for which the groundwork could be laid in countless small details. Due to his status as narrator, Dr. Sheppard’s motives can potentially be concealed (and later detected) in any given word of the novel – and indeed in the silences and omissions between one word and the next. As I examined in Ch.1, hiding a twist in plain sight often depends not on depicting significant details as insignificant, but rather on presenting those details as significant within a misdirecting frame. Ackroyd’s twist is remarkable in that the novel’s narrator is himself a misdirecting frame that surrounds the entire text. His words and phrases throughout the novel are revealed at the end to have been systematically duplicitious – to have seemed to mean one thing while really meaning another.

For a long time, the novel leaves unobtrusively vague why Sheppard is writing at all. Only late in the novel, in Chapter 23 of 27, does his act of writing start to come into view when, in response to Poirot’s mention of his former sidekick Hastings having kept “a written record of the cases,” Sheppard announces: “I’ve read some of Captain Hasting’s narratives, and I thought, why not try my hand at something of the same kind.”372 Sheppard adds that he wanted to seize this “unique opportunity,” since this is “probably the only time I’ll be mixed up with anything of this kind.” First-time readers and (Sheppard hopes) Poirot are invited to infer that these are the breathless words of a fan suddenly invited to play along in a dramatic detective plot far outside his own humdrum life. While this might create some doubts about his competence as a record-

keeper, it reinforces his status as a sincere and credible seeker of the correct solution to this mystery. For informed readers, on the other hand, those same inferences about Sheppard’s decision to start writing point in a very different direction. Whether motivated by arrogance or fear, Sheppard intended to write (as he confesses in the final chapter) “the history of one of Poirot’s failures”.373 Although Sheppard’s attempts to conceal his crime begin well before Poirot’s involvement, we may speculate that the arrival of the famed detective made it all the more important for him to get his story straight and practice his evasive self-exculpatory phrasings.

The diegetic status of the text thus has doubleness built into it: it aims to both report and conceal the crucial details of the case. These two aims, which seem so conflicting, are reconciled through the device of Sheppard never lying: he is scrupulously “correct” – but selective – with the truth. Beyond the satisfaction of hiding the truth in plain sight, and yet having Poirot “fail” to see it, Sheppard may also be aware of Poirot’s reputation for catching suspects in a lie. By never engaging in outright fabrication, Sheppard believes he can avoid his written record betraying him.

Poirot, however, is not fooled. Even before the revelation to readers, Poirot, having read the account so far, teasingly “congratulate[s]” Sheppard on his “modesty” and “reticence.” Unlike Hastings’s accounts, where “On every page, many, many times was the word ‘I’, ” Sheppard has “kept [his] personality in the background”.374 Here it is Poirot whose words are equivocal: first-time readers may take the “congratulations” as sincere, and assume that the self-

373 Christie, p. 283.
374 Christie, p. 255.
centredness of Hastings is the butt of the joke. For such readers, words of apparent praise will stand out in the subsequent exchange:

“A very *meticulous* and *accurate* account,” he said *kindly*. “You have recorded all the facts *faithfully* and *exactly* – though you have shown yourself *becomingly reticent* as to your own share in them.”

“And it has helped you?”

“Yes. I may say that it has *helped* me considerably. […]”

First-time readers may even experience a kind of self-reflexive satisfaction at this moment: aren’t we lucky to have been benefitting from Sheppard’s meticulous, accurate, faithful, exact, becoming, helpful account this whole time! Aren’t we fortunate to have him as the narrator of this detective story!

In fact, this phase of the novel resembles a cat toying with a mouse it has already caught: Poirot is toying with Sheppard, just as Christie is toying with readers. Rereaders can return to this scene and recognize irony everywhere:

“A very meticulous and accurate account,” he *said* kindly. “You have recorded all the facts *faithfully* and *exactly* – though you have *shown* yourself becomingly reticent as to your own share in them.”

“And it has helped you?”

“Yes. I may say that it has *helped* me considerably. […]”

Poirot may *speak* “kindly,” but he knows he’s talking to a murderer. He even adopts Sheppard’s strategic vagueness in referring euphemistically to “your own share” in “the facts.” Informed readers will also realize that “helped” can mean more than at first seemed: it’s not that

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375 Christie, p. 255. Emphases mine.

376 Christie, p. 255. Emphases mine.
the accuracy of Sheppard’s account has helped Poirot in solving the case, but that his reticence helped Poirot recognize Sheppard’s crucial “share” in the murder.

Even eagle-eyed first-time readers who leave this scene with a lingering sense of suspicion about Sheppard’s “reticent” account are offered an apparently satisfying resolution in the very next chapter. In Chapter 24, Poirot accuses Sheppard of “culpable conduct” – namely, hiding Ralph Paton from the police following the murder, by placing him in a “home for the mentally unfit”.377 “Culpable,” yes, but Ralph immediately praises Sheppard as “very loyal” and doing “what he thought was best.” Any doubts about Sheppard’s reticent writing thus seem apparently resolved:

‘You see now why I drew attention to the reticence of your manuscript,’ murmured Poirot. ‘It was strictly truthful as far as it went – but it did not go very far, eh, my friend?’378

As Poirot adds “drily,” “I discover all the little secrets”.

This exchange in Chapter 24 takes place in the context of the gathering of all the suspects to hear the detective’s verdict, conventional for the genre. Yet Poirot’s speech is a surprisingly reticent one. He does not unmask anyone yet, but only announces that he knows who the murderer is. Only in the following chapter (“The Whole Truth”), with Poirot and Sheppard alone, do we build up to the climactic revelation: “In fact – Dr Sheppard!”379

Now unmasked, and left alone by Poirot to settle his affairs before Poirot informs the police in the morning, Sheppard writes the final entry in his account. His commitment to the art

377 Christie, pp. 276–68.
378 Christie, p. 268.
379 Christie, p. 278.
of writing now involves looping back to appraise what he wrote much earlier: he quotes key passages of his own writing verbatim in order to demonstrate the “judicious use of words”

he’s used to hide his crime in plain sight:

I am rather pleased with myself as a writer. What could be neater, for instance, than the following:

“The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone.”

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?”

All true, you see? Like the visual flashbacks to earlier scenes at the end of The Sixth Sense, these exact repetitions of earlier moments in the text serve not only to reinforce the drastic shift in comprehension, but also to reassure flummoxed readers that they haven’t, in fact, been cheated. Because Sheppard has been our narrator all along, this flaunting of verbal ingenuity at once announces a kind of integrity (he never lied) while revealing profound and consistent deceitfulness. Reticence is no longer a narratorial virtue but a sin.

As the text moves towards a diegetic future (“I shall enclose this whole manuscript in an envelope and address it to Poirot”), it also sets up an extra-diegetic future for itself in establishing a transformative new way for readers to reread the novel. Knowing what we now know, we can comb through this novel looking for countless other judicious uses of words, and

381 Christie, p. 284.
382 Christie, p. 285.
indeed for judicious omissions such as the counterfactual “row of stars” that would have made ellipses visible, and which instead passed unnoticed.

The revelation of Sheppard’s “judicious use of words” at the novel’s conclusion draws readers’ attention back to earlier passages of the narrative. As such, the novel’s ending both in its overt quotation of earlier portions and in its allusions to other tactics of duplicity, is extremely effective at conveying to readers not just the surprising identity of the murderer but also the verbal machinery that allowed him to hide in plain sight. Readers could certainly occupy themselves at great length in rereading the novel and reinterpreting its apparently inculpatory or exculpatory details.

This ending which spells out the narrator’s “judicious use of words” had special significance for the initial book reviewers. Faced with the challenge of writing about this book whose ending they knew they couldn’t spoil, this final masterclass in making words mean more than one thing was a spur to their own judicious writing.

4.2 Defining Pre-Reading Environments

Consider the knowledge and expectations you have about a book prior to reading it: you expect that novel X will be a romance novel based on the cover design or a friend’s recommendation, or know that short story Y explores themes of sexuality based on headlines you saw on social media. The pre-reading environment exceeds the knowledge you personally have, however, because it names the information that was out there available to you, only some of which actually reached you. The pre-reading environment consists of the information about a specific work that people in a given place and time can come to know. In parallel with the natural environment, a pre-reading environment describes an epistemic ecosystem within which individuals exist. We begin to trace its contours by asking: what information about a work is in
circulation at a given time and place? What can people glean about a book they haven’t read by opening a newspaper, chatting with a friend or overhearing a conversation on a bus? In a quite literal sense, what knowledge surrounds them? Pre-reading environment is my term for the advance information (including in some cases lack of information or deliberate misinformation) that circulates about a literary work.

Each pre-reading environment is specific to an individual work. While the information may be phrased in many ways, it has the underlying form “[Title] is…” or “[Title] has…” Beloved is about a haunting. My Brilliant Friend has compelling female characters. (Such statements may strike people who have read these novels as insultingly reductive, but the target audience does not yet know any better.) A pre-reading environment is thus distinct from general literary knowledge such as genre conventions (say, detective plotting, romance heroines) aesthetic modes (the picturesque, the sublime), literary forms (the rhyming couplet, the peripeteia, the stage direction) and media (the quarto, the folio, the PDF), which people can learn about in the abstract, unconnected with any one specific work. A pre-reading environment is not entirely sui generis, however, but can encompass information about which existing literary categories a work fits into, and how (“X is a quintessential romance novel”; “Y is an unusual hybrid of Bildungsroman and horror”). In its work-specific nature, the pre-reading environment resembles the “horizon of expectation,” a concept Hans Robert Jauss developed to explain how

383 There are gray areas when it comes to defining the boundaries of a “work” (e.g. serial instalment vs. serialized novel; poem vs. poetry collection; TV episode vs. show), but the term is nonetheless a convenient default. For those who object to the category “work” on philosophical grounds, pre-reading environments could be recast, laboriously, in terms of a “title function,” comparable to Michel Foucault’s “author function.” (Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. by Donald F. Bouchard, trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 113–38.) That is, how the title alone functions (like an author’s name) as a gathering point for meanings.
“the first literary experience of a previously unknown work” nonetheless involves historically specific kinds of “foreknowledge.” However, whereas Jauss’s horizon of expectation consists of the foreknowledge readers have of other works they’ve already read, the pre-reading environment is a source of specific foreknowledge of the work in question. Whereas a horizon of expectation can apply to many works, information within a pre-reading environment is non-transferable: knowing that one particular novel contains a twist doesn’t allow you to know that another one does.

Pre-reading environments are historically specific, and vary across time and space. Again, like Jauss’s horizon of expectations, the pre-reading environment is “continuous[ly]” being “establish[ed] and alter[ed]” in the course of history. And just as the horizon of expectation identifies a dimension of the historicity of literary works that’s not contained within the pages of a book, so too does the pre-reading environment. Works which become

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384 Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, p. 23.

Other studies that investigate how individual works interact with general knowledge are Elaine Auyoung’s When Fiction Feels Real, focusing on sensory and social knowledge, and the theory of “literary competence” in Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (London; New York: Routledge, 2002). See also Peter J. Rabinowitz, Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation, The Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), which despite the title does not focus on pre-reading as such but follows Jauss’s approach in tracing how conventions operate during reading.

385 Like reception studies, a field that emerged in part out of Jauss’s theory, studies of pre-reading environments presuppose that each work’s relation to a historically-specific audience is sui generis, without denying the relevance of broader literary categories like genre as well as extra-literary categories like social and political movements.

386 Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, p. 23.

387 An important influence on Jauss, though little cited in Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, is Roman Ingarden’s conception of the (after-)life of a literary work. Ingarden observes that “All ‘critical’ articles, essays, discussions, attempts at interpretation, historico-literary studies,” as well as “one reader tell[jing] another” about their experience, create a “tradition” for “understanding the given work in a certain
posthumously canonical, such as Moby-Dick or Emily Dickinson’s poetry, are clear examples of radically changed pre-reading environments from one era to another. But pre-reading environments can also change even for works which don’t undergo rises or falls in canonicity: scholars have studied how the 600th anniversary of Dante’s birth in 1865, four years after the unification of Italy, led to nationalistic reinterpretations of the Divine Comedy.\textsuperscript{388} Less studied is how such reinterpretations in turn circulate new ideas about the work among people who haven’t (yet) read it.\textsuperscript{389} Variation across space can be just as important as time: Edgar Allan Poe’s works, championed by Charles Baudelaire, initially had a far more appreciative pre-reading environment in France than in the US.\textsuperscript{390} Much like the natural environment, researchers can divide a pre-reading environment into larger or smaller temporal or spatial segments, while remembering that the object itself is always in flux.

A pre-reading environment circulates partial information about the work. By definition, a pre-reading environment cannot offer what we might consider \textit{complete} information about the work (this would require quoting the work in its entirety, at which point the audience is no longer in a state of \textit{pre}-reading). As my case studies will show in more detail, what information is and is not circulated may be quite precisely calibrated to the needs of the work in question. The

manner,” so that “the reader is, from the beginning, under the influence of a ‘literary atmosphere’” that is historically specific and radically variable over time. (Ingarden, p. 349.)


\textsuperscript{389} For an overt intervention in the experience of future Dante readers, on the occasion of his most recent anniversary, see Justin Steinberg, ‘Four Ways to Ruin Dante – and One to Save Him,’ \textit{Public Books}, 2021.

\textsuperscript{390} Jonathan Culler, ‘Baudelaire and Poe,’ \textit{Zeitschrift für Französische Sprache Und Literatur}, 100 (1990), 61–73.
partiality of information is not a failing of pre-reading environments but a feature that demands study: the pre-reading environment’s partiality determines both what we can and can’t know before reading. Complementary to Andrew Elfenbein’s study of the “gist” memories readers retain from books after reading, pre-reading environments indicate that partial knowledge also underpins our relationship to books before reading even begins.  

Pre-reading environments have a thoroughly material basis. While we may experience the knowledge in our mind as immaterial – and perhaps some fundamental kinds of literary knowledge such as knowledge of story structure or poetic rhythm are truly innate – we come to know about specific works through writing, through speech, through other sensory input. Even a Descartes or a Leibniz would struggle to argue that humans have innate knowledge of *Sex and the City*. Pre-reading environments thus resemble Michel Foucault’s conception of “discourse,” which is “always endowed with a certain materiality” but not “exclusively material.” The material basis of a pre-reading environment overlaps substantially with the category of “paratexts,” which in Genette’s foundational definition include texts that physically surround the literary work (e.g. book covers, title pages, prefaces) and texts about the work which are not “appended […] within the same volume but circulating” within a “physical and social space,” for example in newspapers and on television. Whereas Genette’s focus is on public, “authorized” texts related to a work, however, pre-reading environments can also encompass private and

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391 Elfenbein.


unofficial writings, as well as speech (recommendations from friends, overheard conversations),
non-verbal signifiers (cover art, font choice, paper quality) and contextual cues (in a new vs
secondhand book store; on the syllabus of a university course). While a researcher may not have
access to all its material bases, a pre-reading environment circulates information in materially
localizable ways.\textsuperscript{394}

Pre-reading environments are aggregate objects. Bits of information about a work
circulate piecemeal, and often come from many different sources. This also means they can
contradict each other. While an individual might acquire all their knowledge of a work from a
single source, the pre-reading environment represents all the information potentially available to
them, and thus always leaves open the possibility for further details to reach them from
elsewhere. Foucault evokes how a discourse emerges from “Different o\textit{euvres}, dispersed books,
[a] whole mass of texts” and “and so many authors who know or do not know one another” and
“meet without knowing it.”\textsuperscript{395} In other words, many people produce materials which contribute
to a pre-reading environment not through over-arching coordination but simply by virtue of
discussing the same work.

Pre-reading environments are transpersonal. Any individual’s foreknowledge is derived
from information to which others, at least potentially, have access too. This does not exclude
personal sources of information such as conversations or letter-writing, but what a specific
individual actually comes to know is pre-reading \textit{knowledge} not a pre-reading \textit{environment}. Pre-

\textsuperscript{394} Foucault notes that while the statements that make up a discourse “may, in sheer size, exceed the
capacities of recording, memory, or reading: nevertheless they form a finite grouping” restricted to the set
of statements \textit{actually made} about the object of a discourse. (Foucault, p. 30.)

\textsuperscript{395} Foucault, p. 143.
reading environments consist of marks on a page, sound waves in air, bits and bytes, but not what travels along the optic nerve or ear canal into a person’s brain. Like Foucauldian discourse, pre-reading environments are analyzed “at the level of the ‘it is said,’” not to uncover a “communal opinion […] imposed on every individual” but rather “the totality of things said, the relations, the regularities, and the transformations that may be observed in them.”

What is said about a specific work will always, at least potentially, include multiple voices.

Pre-reading environments are social objects, both in terms of their creation and who has access to them. Insofar as pre-reading environments consist of information about a work made available by at least one person to at least one other person, pre-reading environments are inherently social. This also means that pre-reading environments are socially stratified: for any given pre-reading environment, we can ask what kinds of social categories (e.g. gender, race, class, nationality, language, professional status, institutional position) help or hinder people in contributing to or accessing the information it circulates. At the same time, we should be cautious about assuming that pre-reading environments are walled gardens: once information is in circulation, it may continue to circulate beyond the target audience. Numerous scholars have argued that the act of reading is not solitary but social. The pre-reading environment complements these arguments by demonstrating that sociality is built into the ways people relate to literary works long before they (indeed, even if they never) open the book.

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396 Foucault, p. 138.

Pre-reading environments may lead to reading, but don’t have to. This distinguishes the pre-reading environment from Pierre Bayard’s epistemology of “books you haven’t read,” with which it otherwise has a lot in common. Bayard starts from the premise that we can “develop quite a clear sense of [the] contents” of books by “read[ing] or listen[ing] to what others write or say about” them. Pre-reading environments too presuppose that we can learn about a book we haven’t read from the “discourse,” or “the whole of the discussion” about it. However, Bayard conceives of this “non-reading” as a permanent absention from reading, and thus, with a postmodern flourish, wants to “cut the bonds between discourse and its object,” and insist that the discussion of a book has no necessary connection with its content. In contrast, because pre-reading environments allow for the possibility that people will pick up and read the work in question, the information (including misinformation) disseminated about a work does bear some relation to its content, if only because the audience can potentially compare the discussion with the work itself. That said, there are more books than any person could possibly read in a lifetime, so any given person is in a relation of pre-reading to many more books than they ever read.

A pre-reading environment has a reciprocal relationship with its work. On the one hand, the pre-reading environment is responsive to what is contained within the work, in some cases with enormous precision and sophistication. In the case studies that follow, I show how reviewers of novels by Agatha Christie and Virginia Woolf deployed strategies for delivering

398 Bayard, pp. 46, 150.
399 Bayard, pp. 32, 184.
400 On “not reading” in relation to the disproportion between the number of books and limited human time, see Amy Hungerford, ‘On Not Reading DFW,’ in Making Literature Now, Post 45 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 141–67; and Gitelman.
information that were carefully calibrated to the formal and aesthetic features of each novel. While some pre-reading environments may offer a distorted picture of the work, even such misinformation must be understood as responding – maliciously or carelessly as the case may be – to what actually is in the work. Conversely, the pre-reading environment can give readers expectations for a work that shape their eventual experience of reading it, or put them off reading it altogether. By reciprocal relationship, then, I don’t necessarily mean symbiotic, but simply that each side can influence the other.

To sum up, each pre-reading environment is specific to a single work. It is also specific to a time and place, with enormous historical and geographical variation possible. It circulates partial information about the work, and this partiality is itself instructive. It consists of information contained in empirically localizable materials, which are aggregate and transpersonal. A pre-reading environment is a social object, and social categories play a role in who can and can’t contribute to or access a given pre-reading environment. A pre-reading environment may lead to reading, but doesn’t have to, and it has a reciprocal relationship with its respective work.

4.3 Senses of an Ending: Ackroyd and Dalloway

Given how much of Ackroyd’s effect hinges on readers not recognizing the narratorial duplicity until the novel itself reveals it, withholding this information becomes crucially important. In this section, I reconstruct the pre-reading environment that existed around Ackroyd for its initial readership, in order to offer a historically situated account of what kinds of knowledge early readers might have brought to this novel.

More specifically, I examine the information about Ackroyd put into circulation through print media immediately following its publication in 1926. What things about Ackroyd might an
ordinary reader already have come to know through these channels before they started reading? Close examination of reviews and adverts reveals that the pre-reading environment in 1926 was in fact carefully constructed to maximize the effectiveness of Ackroyd’s twist. In addition, the various texts making up the pre-reading environment used many of the same sophisticated techniques as the novel to hide clues about the twist in plain sight.

The collected reviews and adverts for Ackroyd were of course a small part of a much larger literary and publishing ecosystem. In order to better understand what broader tendencies Ackroyd’s pre-reading environment fit into, as well as what made its pre-reading environment distinctive, this section compares it with the pre-reading environment of a novel at once comparable and strikingly different: Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway.

Both the basic similarities and the basic contrasts between these two novels make the comparison appealing.

Similarities:

• Mrs Dalloway and Ackroyd were both initially published in 1925 (Ackroyd’s serial began just two months after Dalloway’s publication)
• by 1925, both writers had established careers as writers, having each published 5 books (5 novels for Christie, 3 novels and 2 essay collections for Woolf), a short story collection and various individual short stories
• both writers were British women, born 8 years apart at the end of the nineteenth century

Contrasts:

• Dalloway was high art for a small elite readership; Ackroyd was bestselling entertainment for a mass readership
• Dalloway ends with an epiphany; Ackroyd ends with a revelation
• Dalloway has come to be seen as an exemplary Modernist novel; Ackroyd as an exemplary detective novel
In the analysis that follows, the pre-reading environments for these two novels sometimes converge, sometimes diverge. What fundamentally connects the two, however, is that both novels, in very different ways, prompted reviewers and advertizers to engage in extensive and sophisticated management of pre-reading knowledge. In both cases, what potential readers did and didn’t know was perceived as crucial to a successful reading experience. The goal of this comparison is therefore to illuminate the reciprocal relationship between a pre-reading environment and a literary work’s plot at a specific historical juncture.

The materials to which I turn in reconstructing the pre-reading environments for these novels at the time of their initial publication are newspaper reviews. While book reviews can of course be studied as evidence of reception (i.e. individual and collective reader response) they are also texts written, at least in part, for an audience of pre-readers. Like blurbs, title pages, prefaces, forewords, primers and prolegomena, book reviews are noteworthy because they intervene overtly in pre-reading environments.\footnote{Book reviews are also themselves a historically variable genre. Reviewing conventions have changed significantly over time: for discussions of how plot was downplayed in Victorian reviews, see Garcha; and Elfenbein, 106-108. A turning point in this history is Wilkie Collins’s 1860 request to reviewers to refrain from “telling his story at second-hand,” so as to avoid “destroying, beforehand, two main elements in the attraction of all stories – the interest of curiosity, and the excitement of surprise.” (Collins, pp. 645–46.) Furthermore, while the range of people writing and reading reviews had somewhat expanded by the early twentieth century, in general reviews from this period may skew towards elitism, or at least towards the interests of writers and the publishing industry.} The reviewers of \textit{Dalloway} and \textit{Ackroyd} came up with dramatically different strategies to prepare potential readers to appreciate the respective endings. Whereas reviewers of \textit{Dalloway} offered detailed discussions of the novel’s ending (whether approvingly or disapprovingly), \textit{Ackroyd}’s reviewers consistently avoided spoiling the
twist while nonetheless setting vague expectations of a thrilling denouement. In both cases, the reviewers had a privileged position in choosing what information to circulate about each novel.

These book reviews appeared within an increasingly complex and expansive media ecosystem. In the early twentieth century, mass literacy and mass-produced print as well as the increasing commercialization and industrialization of the publishing industry created many more niches for the novel as a consumer commodity. Correspondingly, these conditions allowed for pre-reading environments that were increasingly large-scale, impersonal, and intertwined with the publishing, journalism and advertising industries. While *Dalloway* is at the elite end of the spectrum and *Ackroyd* is mass-market, taken together their pre-reading environments begin to suggest how both elite and mass-market publications came to depend on an armature of professional promotion at this point in literary history.

4.3.1 The Spoiler-Free Zone Around *Ackroyd*

The reviewers of *Ackroyd* took Sheppard’s strategy of selective truthfulness and ran with it. His confession modelled for reviewers how best to discuss this novel’s most remarkable narrative innovation without (yet) giving the game away. A first indicator of reviewers’ judicious use of words: the word “twist” is nowhere to be found. This is despite the term “plot twist” having been in use since at least 1916, and precursors like “O. Henry twist” dating back even further.

402 The question of agency when it comes to pre-reading environments is beyond the scope of this chapter. While there can certainly be intentional actions by individuals who contribute to a pre-reading environment, the question of whether and how this scales up to an entire environment is harder to say. At any rate, these book reviewers across dozens of newspapers and two continents were not engaging in coordinated action. The tendencies and points of convergence I present below may be best thought of as emergent phenomena: patterns that develop cumulatively rather than through systematic organization.
The absence of the word “twist” tells us something about the exceptional epistemic challenges that twist narratives pose for a pre-reading environment: even to identify a narrative as having a twist is a kind of meta-spoiler. Having the rug pulled out from under you is a quite different experience when you’re expecting it compared to when it takes you by surprise. Instead, vaguer terms like “denouement,” “revelation” and “the unexpected last” stood in, still referring to endings but encompassing a much broader range of narrative surprises and resolutions than “plot twist.” Vocabulary specific to detective fiction also appeared often: “solution” and the verb “solve” were frequent, and one reviewer referred to “the real culprit.” Other reviewers referred indirectly to the ending through references to position in the text: “closing chapter,” “concluding pages,” “la dernière page.” In combination with the novel’s title, newspaper readers were left in no doubt that the ending would give a (surprising) answer to the question of whodunit (even more directly, the serial edition of the novel had had the title Who Killed Ackroyd?). With the benefit of hindsight, all these indirect terms start to look like evasiveness, a principled refusal to call a twist a twist.

These reviewers were sensitive to the risk of what we’d now call spoilers, and in many cases discussed the problem explicitly. The New York Times reviewer stated that “It would most certainly not be fair in the present case to reveal the outcome […] and it would consequently be pointless to give a detailed synopsis of it and tantalizingly stop at the dénouement.” Not only did this reviewer acknowledge the unfairness of giving too much information on the “outcome,”

403 ‘Literary Gossip,’ Los Angeles Times, 1927, C12.
405 ‘Le meurtre de Roger Ackroyd,’ Excelsior, 1927, 2.
but also noted that giving too “detailed” a synopsis of the rest of the plot would also already be problematic. The review in *The Woman’s Leader* similarly offered a disclaimer about avoiding spoilers: “[Ackroyd] upsets all the canons of detective story writing. I shall not say how, because it is impossible to do so without giving a clue to the mystery contained in it, and […] I do not want to spoil the pleasure for others.” Aware of the problem of summarizing the novel at all without giving “a clue” to the solution, this reviewer decided to avoid summary altogether. For both these reviewers, avoiding spoilers was thus not simply a matter of withholding a statement of the twist, but also of leaving the setup on the vague side. At the same time, a disclaimer about avoiding spoilers alerted readers that there was *some* thrilling surprise at the novel’s conclusion.

Refusing detailed summary accords well with the review format, where space is at a premium. In addition, a reviewer on deadline could excuse themselves from the extra work of detailed plot summary and instead write about other aspects like character, atmosphere, authorial sensibility. A virtuous constellation of factors: everything pushed reviewers towards withholding or describing in only the most general terms a large chunk of Ackroyd’s plot.

The reviewers went further than simply creating an informational vacuum around Ackroyd’s twist. Instead, many of them, like Doctor Sheppard, hid clues to the twist in plain sight. Consciously or unconsciously inspired by the novel’s own ingeniously evasive phrasings, many reviewers alluded to the plot twist in inconspicuous ways. The *New York Times* reviewer mentioned that “The story is told in the first person by Dr. Sheppard, the physician in a small


408 See Elfenbein, 105, on the strong differences in cognitive effort between recalling plot points (constantly changing) and recalling recurring or omnipresent features such as those mentioned above.
English village called King’s Abbott”, sequencing the sentence’s elements so that it seems to be giving readers information about character and setting, but slips in as apparently incidental the crucial narratorial information. The same review went on to state that the real murderer’s “identity is made all the more baffling through the author’s technical cleverness in selecting the part he is to play in the story”: while “part,” taken alone, might evoke a theatrical context, where a part is something unremarkable that every actor has to “play,” the combination with “technical” hints very quietly at the unique narratological position of the narrator. The review added that Christie’s “non-committal characterization” of the murderer “makes it a perfectly fair procedure,” thus echoing the hints dropped by Poirot throughout the novel about Doctor Sheppard’s “reticence.” The Scotsman too repeated a trick from the novel by mentioning how the reader has been “balancing in his mind from chapter to chapter the probabilities for or against the eight or nine persons at whom suspicion points”. The slippage between eight and nine recalls Poirot’s final reunion, at which he reads out the names of all but one person in the room, and announces “The list I have just read […] is a list of suspected persons”. It is in fact the one other person present, not enumerated as officially “suspected,” whodidit.

Some misdirections were quite elaborate. The New York Herald Tribune’s review praised the novel’s “truly startling denouement” in its second sentence, and then its third sentence qualified that the denouement “is obtained […] at a slight sacrifice of plausible character portrayal.” The paragraph goes on to mention the “inveterate gossip” Caroline, “a sister of the

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409 ‘Superior Mystery.’
410 ‘The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,’ The Scotsman, 1926, 2.
411 Christie, p. 259.
412 Baker.
This review delivers twist-relevant information in a way that offers a more immediately plausible construal: here, the discussion seems to be contrasting the dull doctor with the characters Christie has successfully made vivid and lively. Given a previous mention of “feminine authorship,” readers are cued to take “cautiously drawn” as meaning “drawn by Christie,” when in fact the sentences also hint that Sheppard, as narrator, is “drawing” himself, and with “caution.” Later, the same reviewer seems to me to overstep the mark just slightly: “An unusual feature of the opening of the narrative is a telephone message to Dr. Sheppard, apparently from the murderer, a few minutes after the crime is committed. He announces himself falsely as Parker, the butler at Fernly Park.” While “apparently from the murderer” is nicely ambiguous, the use of the pronoun “he” to refer back to “the murderer” implies a (diegetically) real existence to this fabrication of Sheppard’s. Sheppard himself would never be so careless.

While tipping over into overt misrepresentation was one risk, reviewers could also fail to withhold enough. The Scotsman, after its elegant “eight or nine” suspects mentioned above, went on in the space of a one-paragraph review to state that:

we are kept guessing without coming much nearer to the solution, notwithstanding that we have the privilege of perusing the notes of Dr Sheppard, the medical man who is on the spot almost immediately after the crime has been committed.413

(Irony: “privilege,” “almost immediately.”) Then:

[Poirot], with whom [Dr Sheppard] seeks to play the part of Watson with Sherlock Holmes.

413 ‘The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.’
(Irony: “seeks,” “play.”) Then:

in the end it turns out that the Doctor himself is responsible for the largest bit of reticence.

This last sentence echoes Poirot’s teasing hints to Sheppard about his “reticence,” but whereas the novel offers us the false resolution of Sheppard having been reticent about helping Ralph Paton disappear, in such a compressed review the mention of “the largest bit of reticence” is practically a spoiler. On first reading I in fact thought this review was mean-spiritedly spoiling the story, until I read the final sentence: “The tale may be recommended as one of the cleverest and most original of its kind.”

Elsewhere among the reviews, intentional spoilers did appear, though only (from what I’ve been able to find) in France. A particularly bizarre review opened with the statement that Ackroyd is “certainly the strangest and most disturbing of detective novels yet written” (“assurément le plus étrange et le plus angoissant des romans policiers qu’on ait encore écrits”), and then went on to recount the entire plot in chronological order, i.e. beginning with Sheppard blackmailing Mrs Ferrars, moving through the crime to Poirot’s investigation and even Sheppard’s final suicide.⁴¹⁴ (Despite spoiling everything willy-nilly, I note that this reviewer was the most precise about the novel’s complicated instance de narration.) The reviewer noted that “by means of a series of cleverly imagined maneuvers, [Sheppard] endeavors to mislead the investigations of the police” (“par le moyen d’une série de manoeuvres savamment imaginées, [Sheppard] s’efforce d’égayer les recherches de la police”) – yet seemingly showed minimal respect for the cleverness of these “manoeuvres” in spoiling them in advance! The review’s final

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⁴¹⁴ ‘Chronique bibliographique,’ Le Temps, 1927, 5.
one-sentence paragraph hit me with the force of a plot twist: “it’s impossible to imagine a more exciting debut for a collection of adventure novels” (“On ne saurait imaginer un début plus passionnant pour une collection de romans d’aventures”). The logic of spoiler avoidance which was in its infancy in the 1920s is one we’ve now so thoroughly internalized that it’s hard to imagine how this reviewer thought they were helping the novel.

Another French review, however, did use spoilers maliciously:

Recipe: take a denouement, meaning the end of the yarn, and then, by tracking back along the course of your narrative, you arrive at the moment where everything is perfectly tangled up and where nobody knows if the doctor or the valet should be arrested. The voice of the dead man was heard at a time when he was already dead. That’s not astonishing, as the reader already knew very well that the doctor – it was of course he – had activated the dictaphone after the victim’s death.415

This was the entire review. Whereas a German advert praised Christie’s creation of a complicated, entangled plot (“The intertwined threads are muddled with virtuosic mastery”), this French reviewer presented it as a “formula,” where the writer works backwards from a “denouement” to contrive a situation where everything is “perfectly tangled up”.416 While this review pointed out the telling detail of the dictaphone, it in fact caricatured what in the novel is more complicated: “at a time when he was already dead” is something that’s only established at

415 “Recette : prenez un dénouement, c’est-à-dire le bout du fil, et puis, en remontant le cours de votre récit, vous arrivez au moment où tout est parfaitement embrouillé et où on ne sait pas s’il faudra arrêter le docteur ou le valet de chambre. On a entendu la voix du mort à une heure où il était mort. Cela n’est pas étonnant, car le lecteur savait fort bien déjà que le docteur – c’était bien lui – avait fait marcher le dictaphone après la mort de l’assassiné.” (Aristide, ‘La critique d’Aristide,’ Aux écoutes, 9.484 (1927), 23.)


What’s at the root of the prejudice against writers working backwards from the end? Certainly a broader dislike of “contrivance” plays a part. However, there remains something oddly naive about critics assuming that the sequence of plot creation should parallel exactly the sequence of plot consumption – but why?
the novel’s end, so connecting these two details presupposes retrospective knowledge unavailable to first-time readers.

These clumsy or malicious spoilers help draw attention to what can seem unremarkable about the vast majority of reviews. Whether they dropped hints or passed over the telling details in silence, most reviewers – appreciative of the novel’s twist – understood that reticence was necessary to create an environment within which readers could experience the novel most effectively.

In sum, the pre-reading environment that reviewers in 1926 constructed for Ackroyd not only withheld spoilers concerning the novel’s twist ending but also – using the same strategies of selective truthfulness as the novel itself – prepared readers for the twist in ways designed to remain unnoticed until after reading the novel. There was a risk that readers would fail to appreciate – or would even actively resent – the novel’s ending, but the nature of a twist ending prevented reviewers from explaining and justifying its value explicitly. Nonetheless, alongside the withholdings, vaguenesses and misdirections, many reviews plainly defended the ending as fair:

\[ \text{a perfectly fair procedure [...] unusually plausible explanation at the end \footnote{417} } \]
\[ \text{I suspect that no one will feel cheated at the end} \footnote{418} \]
\[ \text{in manipulating the many clues the writer plays scrupulously fair with the discerning reader} \footnote{419} \]

\footnote{417} ‘Superior Mystery.’
\footnote{418} Baker.
\footnote{419} ‘New Novels,’ \textit{The Daily Telegraph}, 1926, 15.
While such statements certainly acknowledge the potential for readers’ negative reactions to the ending, overall the tone of these defenses is measured and not polemical. This casts further doubt on the “outrage myth” mentioned in this chapter’s introduction. While studying the pre-reading environment can’t prove that nobody was outraged, it does indicate not only that reviewers were generally appreciative of the novel’s twist, but worked concertedly to help the twist come off for ordinary readers too. The outrage myth attests to the risk Ackroyd’s narrative innovation ran, yet examination of the novel’s initial pre-reading environment begins to suggest why the novel, far from causing mass outrage, was an instant hit.

Reviewers’ judicious use of words also modelled a way for ordinary readers to talk about this novel after they’d read it with those who hadn’t read it yet. Here are the things it’s safe to mention, here are some deft phrasings that will tantalize without spoiling. And, by implication, don’t mention that there’s a plot twist! The clues hidden in plain sight were thus not simply inside jokes, planted to raise a smile from readers in the know, but offered guidance to such readers for how to talk in precisely vague terms about this tricksy novel. Because of course, beyond the media, how ordinary people talked about the novel with each other is also part of what I’ve called the pre-reading environment, though harder to find documented traces of. Whatever the actual consequences were, the reviews presented a sophisticated spoiler-free ethos that could be adopted in everyday conversations just as it was in print.420

420 This discussion of Ackroyd’s pre-reading environment could be expanded to include what Genette calls “peritexts,” i.e. paratexts that materially surround the text itself. Like the reviews, the novel’s peritexts in various editions used strategies resembling the novel itself in order to present “truthful” but “reticent” information about the novel. Relevant elements include ambiguous cover images (such as the 1939 Pocket edition, which implicit depicts a first-person perspective looking down on the stabbed victim); the novel’s dedication (“To Punkie, who likes an orthodox detective story, murder, inquest, and
4.3.2 Foretelling the Plot of *Dalloway*

Whereas with *Ackroyd* the concern was to maintain what readers *didn’t* know about the plot, *Dalloway’s* reviewers believed there was plot information as well as aesthetic principles that readers needed to know in advance in order to appreciate the novel. The topic of plot spoilers in fact seems to miss the point, since the ending of *Dalloway* is surprising largely for what *doesn’t* happen. The novel unfolds over a single day, as Clarissa Dalloway prepares to host a party for her politician husband and reminisces about her past experiences and relationships. Peter Walsh, an old friend who once proposed to her (fruitlessly), is to attend the party after many years’ absence. At the party, Peter wanders about looking for Clarissa, until:

- he sat on for a moment. What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?
- It is Clarissa, he said.
- For there she was.421

It’s a moment of intense feeling and heightened perception for Peter, but the novel ends before anything actually happens – we don’t even know if their eyes meet. From today’s perspective, it’s a quintessential example of the Modernist resistance to closure.

The pre-reading environment for *Dalloway* prepared its readers for plotlessness. While *Dalloway’s* ending might seem innocuous after a century of elliptical, ambiguous and

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suspicion falling on every one in turn!”); the table of contents (in particular the last few chapter titles: “The Whole Truth / And Nothing But The Truth / Apologia”); and the blurb:

“This is the Story […] Geniuses like Sherlock Holmes often find a use for faithful mediocrities like Dr. Watson, and by a coincidence it is the local doctor who follows Poirot round, and himself tells the story. Furthermore, what seldom happens in these cases, he is instrumental in giving Poirot one of the most valuable clues to the mystery.”

inconclusive endings in literature and movies, in 1925 this resistance to narrative closure was remarkable. Reviewers remarked on the ending, and in doing so set expectations for what other readers should also find remarkable. In *Dalloway*’s case, discussions of the novel – and its ending in particular – deployed various sophisticated strategies to implicitly and explicitly prepare readers to appreciate an ending that might otherwise fall flat. In a mirror image of Ackroyd’s reviewers, *Dalloway*’s reviewers managed information about the plot’s ending to reinforce what they saw as the novel’s own aesthetic project.

One of the most striking features of the reviews is that at least three major newspapers quoted in its entirety the epiphanic passage I’ve just quoted.\(^{422}\) Even without further discussion of the novel’s plot(lessness), quoting its final words already told readers in advance not to expect any more conclusive an ending than this. Indeed, *The Atlanta Constitution* prefaced its quotation of the passage with the statement that “There is, properly, no end to ‘Mrs. Dalloway’ – no conclusion following a narrative climax.”\(^{423}\) Instead it introduced the passage as the moment “When the last of [Clarissa’s] facets has been put in place,” shifting the emphasis from plot to character. The *New York Times* similarly quoted the passage to illustrate how Woolf’s “detachment” from her characters “is beautiful and complete,” rather than presenting characters with a “cheap sneer” of “irony.”\(^{424}\) The *New York Herald Tribune* quoted the passage to stress

\(^{422}\) Verbatim quotations of passages from a work are a gray area where a pre-reading environment allows for a (partial) “reading” of the work itself. On the quotation of novel passages in anthologies, see Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*. On the use of extended block quotations in Victorian reviewing, see Dames, ‘On Not Close Reading.’


the power of a “sudden quickening of the tempo” to “communicate” a character’s “emotion” to readers. In each case, the reviewers privileged another aspect of the novel (character, style, authorial sensibility), while through quotation they performatively signaled that this was not a novel to be reading for the plot. Beyond the three reviewers who quoted the ending, almost all reviewers discussed the events of the ending (such as they are) in some detail. Rather than constituting “spoilers,” this detailed information about the ending more or less explicitly told readers this novel could not be spoiled by knowing the plot beforehand.

Besides quotation and discussion of the uneventful ending, reviewers’ other main talking point which more subtly set expectations for the ending was Dalloway’s status as a “one-day” novel:

One Day in London the Subject of Mrs. Woolf’s New Novel

A day in the life of Mrs. Dalloway is the whole story that Mrs. Woolf tells. A not particularly eventful day


426 Another plot point from Dalloway that was widely circulated in reviews: the character Septimus’s suicide in the middle of the novel. Despite the novel itself not presenting Septimus’s suicide as a foregone conclusion, indeed depicting it as the culmination of an agonizing paragraph of uncertainty, reviewers didn’t treat this (or any other moment in Dalloway) as a narrative surprise that needed protecting.

The Atlanta Constitution’s review initially resembled Ackroyd’s reviews in its vague allusions: “A tragic circumstance brushes closely enough for her to feel its nearness before it veers away, casting a shadow over the end of the party.” (Pettus.) The reticence is only temporary, however. A few paragraphs later the reviewer not only returns to these events in more detail but quotes the precise details of the suicide: “In the end there remained [for Septimus] only the lodging house window, ‘the tiresome, the troublesome and rather melodramatic business of opening it and throwing himself out’ to escape the doctor who, for that reason, came a little late to Clarissa’s party.” Despite the novel itself not announcing Septimus’s suicide in advance as a foregone conclusion, indeed presenting it as the culmination of an agonizing paragraph of uncertainty, reviewers didn’t treat this (or any other moment in Dalloway) as a narrative surprise that needed protecting through vagueness or omission.

427 Crawford.

428 Pettus.
People will tell you, with a face of praise, that the whole action of Mrs. Dalloway passes in one day. As a category, one-day novels in particular put hard limits not only the types of events readers can expect at the end, but on the temporal scope (no more than 24 hours) and closure (minimal) the ending can deliver. Spoiler might seem too strong a word for this, but comparison with Ackroyd is instructive: both “the narrator did it” and “one-day novel” tell us not just about the novel’s structure but how it will end, reinforced in Dalloway’s case by frequent mentions of the culminating “party.” Rather like quoting the ending, reviewers’ frequent mentions of the one-day structure as well as the novel’s culminating “party” not only set specific expectations (the novel will cover this one day and end with the party) but also delimited what not to expect (it won’t go beyond this one day; the everyday events with which it begins won’t give way to more momentous ones). And once again, performatively, these mentions of the “one-day” structure told people even before they began reading not to invest too much in the plot.

Intertwined with discussions of Dalloway’s ending and one-day structure were reviewers attempts to explain the novel’s overarching plotlessness. One reviewer explicitly connected plotlessness and the one-day structure: “the kaleidoscopic moments of a busily reminiscent mind rather than any continuous story. There is no substance to the book in the ordinary sense of plot.

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429 Parsons.
431 For a study of the one-day novel’s temporality, see Bryony Randall, ‘A Day’s Time: The One-Day Novel and the Temporality of the Everyday,’ New Literary History, 47.4 (2016), 591–610.
and narrative. […] That is all – one brief day in a woman’s mind.” Readers of this review could expect that the limited scope of the events would be counterbalanced by rich character psychology. Not all reviewers were convinced the novel’s plotlessness, or its psychological inwardness, was a good thing. “Action is at a discount, the characters think, but it is doubtful if they live” stated one. But whether approving or disapproving, most reviewers felt that the plotlessness called for explanation. One reviewer explained that instead of “the objective development of a plot,” Dalloway offered a “subjective design” which was “a challenge to the reader’s own experience” and demanded “creative collaboration.” Instead of concluding with “so definite a thing as a ‘solution,’” this novel provided “implications which should serve to amplify the reader’s state of mind and being.” Dalloway’s plot was explained by this reviewer as a kind of parable, an allegorical aid for making readers’ reflect on their own lives and experiences. Readers were thus told that such little plot as there was in the novel was there to be mentally transformed by them. The novel’s final pages were less an ending, then, than a starting point for readers’ own self-development.

Dalloway’s plotlessness was often presented as complementary to, and reinforcing of, the novel’s innovations in depicting characters’ inner lives. Precise, complex, detailed depiction of the life of the mind was what mattered. One reviewer told readers that they’d spend the entire novel “watch[ing] minutely the quivering activity of [the] cerebrum” of various characters, and another more tentatively described the reading experience as being “as if one watched

433 ‘New Fiction,’ The Scotsman, 1925, 2.
434 Crawford.
Mrs. Dalloway’s mental processes […] and followed the train of thought of Peter,” calling the novel “a chronicle of thought” and thus “the reverse side of the novel of action.” Plot and character were presented as in a relation of inverse proportion: less plot allowed for richer characterization, and richer characterization meant less plot was wanted or needed. Indeed, the reviewers discussed above who quoted the novel’s ending all defended its uneventfulness in terms of character.

While Modernist fiction in particular continues to be discussed by literary scholars in terms of generic innovation and “making it new,” and the reading experience of these works as one of Benjaminian “shock” or Shklovskyan “defamiliarization,” the evidence from Dalloway’s pre-reading environment suggests that early readers wouldn’t have been caught completely off-guard by Woolf’s novelties. While some might object that reviewers, perhaps with benevolent intentions, were working against the aesthetic project of Woolf and her Modernist peers, softening the unfamiliar edges of an experience that was meant to be new and challenging, the simple fact is that this is the pre-reading environment in which Dalloway’s early readers found themselves – and the novel succeeded in this context. It’s hard to imagine a better fate for any work of literature than Dalloway has had – instantly admired, and still widely read a century later. Even if Woolf had objected to certain features of the reviews, they seem to have helped rather than harmed her novel. In order for Dalloway’s experiments with character, style and sensibility to pay off, readers (at least those who read newspaper reviews) were extensively informed about what (not) to expect from the plot.

In sum, *Dalloway*’s reviewers did not perceive spoiling both specific and over-arching details of the plot as spoiling readers’ enjoyment of the novel. On the contrary, they gave readers such plot details both to entice them and to pre-emptively guide them towards other aspects of *Dalloway* which were truly important. Comparing the two pre-reading environments also throws into sharp relief the tightrope that *Ackroyd* reviewers were walking: the novel’s primary appeal lay in its plot, yet careless discussion of it would undermine people’s motivation to ever read the novel.

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Analyzing how these two pre-reading environments managed knowledge of the ending reveals just how extensively, and at times with remarkable sophistication, reviewers and advertizers managed readers’ prior knowledge of each novel in a way intended to create the best chance of a positive reading experience. A cynic might say that all these writers were simply part of the same literary-industrial complex, self-interestedly shaping the reception in order to justify their own existence. I don’t deny this, but want to suggest that when a literary-industrial complex is in place, studying the distinct choices made to promote one novel compared to another can give us a unique vantage point on a work’s position within a broader culture and public which we can’t access directly.

The “pro” in “promotion” can imply an all-conquering bias in favour of the thing being promoted. In contrast, by considering adverts and reviews under the broader category of pre-reading environment, I want to bring out a strongly temporal sense of the word promotion. It matters less that these texts tended to be (with numerous exceptions) committed to advancing the success of each novel than that they were written for and reached people in advance of their reading of the novel. The pre-emptive temporality of promotion is especially crucial to consider.
in relation to plot twists, since there are no neutral options: in order for people to want to buy the book they must know something about it, yet too much information of any kind could be fatal.

The reviews and adverts for both Ackroyd and Dalloway certainly offered information strategically chosen to encourage readers to buy the book in question, but they did so not in order to trick readers into buying a worthless book they’d regret but to help them appreciate what’s valuable in each work as and when they come to read it. There are no doubt many cases of cynical misrepresentation among advertizers, and even journalists, over-hyping a product to drive sales and not worrying about buyers’ eventual disappointment when the reality doesn’t live up to the hype – but this is not true of the materials I’ve studied here. With very few exceptions, the promotion for both novels pre-emptively supported potential future readers in ways they themselves would want – if they were in a position to make choices about something that was as yet unknown.

**Conclusion: Reading and Epistemic Luck**

The care taken to construct these pre-reading environments offers a very different perspective on the ethical turn in literary theory. It clarifies, by contrast, that the focus of ethical conceptions of literature has been on (immediate or long-term) responses to literary works: ethical significance has been taken to reside in what happens after reading, whether seconds, minutes, hours, days or years later. What ethical significance might we attribute to people’s lives before reading a particular work of literature? I want to suggest that the creation of a suitable pre-reading environment is an ethical achievement.

This pre-reading ethics diverges from both Aristotelian and poststructuralist ethical literary theory in not being about moral improvement, nor about cultivating affect or understanding for other (groups of) people. Instead it’s an ethics that is closer to professional
ethos, and its orientation is strongly epistemic: what knowledge is and isn’t it fair (or helpful or kind) for a reviewer to put into circulation? It’s also a decidedly impersonal and collective ethics: one group of people (reviewers) create an epistemic environment for another group of people (future readers) who they can never personally know, nor will any one individual ever receive personal recognition for this ethical work. Like infrastructure, when it’s working well nobody notices. Withholding spoilers, for example, is a custom recognized in the breach, as in those clumsy or vindictive French reviews.

While my study of these two pre-reading environments has focused on reviews and adverts, this ethos isn’t just limited to people in the literary-industrial complex but also extends to ordinary readers. If you keep spoiling plots without your friends’ consent, they might well move from viewing you as just clumsy and thoughtless to actually morally defective. Spoiling or not spoiling a plot may seem like small potatoes compared to cultivating compassion or experiencing radical alterity, but it’s an ethical matter nonetheless.

The term “consent” is a troubling one in relation to this topic, and starts to bring out the more substantial ethical questions at stake. Even if a friend answers no to the question “do you mind if I spoil it?” they’ve already been told – without their consent – that there’s something there to be spoiled. Conversely, by definition, consent – let alone “informed” consent – is impossible when it comes to having knowledge withheld from you, and yet if offered the choice you might well have chosen exactly that state of unspoiled ignorance. (I wish I’d had the 1926 pre-reading environment for Ackroyd, but instead came to the novel already spoiled.) Withholding spoilers, and more broadly managing other people’s knowledge, can seem worryingly paternalistic – deciding for others what’s best for them. Yet when those who have
read a book are talking to those who haven’t, the former really do know better (or at least know more), and must make a choice about what to do with that knowledge one way or another.

The strongly epistemic quality to this pre-reading ethics, and the fact that it presupposes a situation in which an unpredictable distribution of people will or won’t already have read the work in question, raises a factor that I want to call epistemic luck. The parallel here is with Bernard Williams’s concept of “moral luck,” which drew attention to the troublesome presence of chance and contingency in situations where we want to attribute full moral agency.\(^{436}\) Similarly, whether or not a person has already come to know something is in ways both cosmically vast and trivially small a matter of luck. (The fantasy of mass education may be to remove luck from knowledge by creating a shared core of knowledge known by all, but variation stubbornly persists.) I don’t want to argue that Ackroyd’s reviewers were moral saints for the pre-reading environment they co-constructed, but rather that Ackroyd – like other works before it – made it an urgent need for reviewers to create an environment that accommodated the vagaries of epistemic luck.

Ackroyd is itself a finely-tuned machine for minimizing epistemic luck. As the early reviewers recognized, while a few readers might hit on or “spot” the twist before it’s revealed, the novel is engineered to make this a rare occurrence. In addition, while readers striving to make sense of the mystery might want to figure out whodunit before the end, readers that actually do so are in some sense the most unlucky. In countless small details, Ackroyd works to keep readers

\(^{436}\) See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, Reprinted (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999). While my phrase has also been used by Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), he approaches “epistemic luck” in a purely epistemological (and thus individual) context, whereas I’m interested in luck on an interpersonal or sociological level.
in a state of ignorance that’s desirable, despite readers consciously desiring the opposite.

Conversely, when the twist is revealed, no reader is left in any doubt as to how they should now understand the novel’s events and characters. Once again, luck is kept to a minimum.

A carefully constructed pre-reading environment is a force for inclusion. It prompts a larger number of people not only to read a work, but to read it in the way they will in retrospect have wanted to read it. The pre-reading environment thus draws attention to an almost paradoxical feature of all twist narratives: that we may enjoy them, and even desire them in advance, but can’t easily seek them out for ourselves. A plot twist, well delivered, satisfies a wish that we have no agency to pursue ourselves: the wish to be surprised.
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