Fiction and the Shivering Reader

An Existential Analysis of the Realist Novel and the Reader’s Search for Answers to Questions of the Meaning of Life.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to examine two “large” and somewhat diffuse questions: the first is the question of why the novel reader reads; the second, the question of what the meaning of life is. The former is not often asked by contemporary literary theorists, although it does still have a “quiet” presence amongst critical and theoretical works. The latter question, despite its somewhat anachronistic and “unfashionable” nature, remains a cause of anxiety in the secularised post/modern world, where God is often defined as “dead” and the answers to the question of meaning are no longer given. It will be argued that the answers to both questions are very much related: the novel reader is what Walter Benjamin somewhat offhandedly calls a “shivering reader”—an existentially anxious reader—and his or her motive for reading is to better understand the meaning of life. The shivering reader searches for answers to the question of meaning by looking to the novel’s fictional characters from which the reader derives the warmth of wisdom and insight into the creation and revelation of meaning. These insights are derived from the characters either explicitly—from their direct, authoritative, dying revelations—or implicitly—from the reader’s evaluation of the characters’ choices of meaningful projects and their actions. These insights enable the reader to better inform his or her own meaningful choices. Moreover, as Benjamin claims, the reader looks primarily to fiction because of the modern world’s privatisation of death—a world in which death and the dying’s revelations are no longer omnipresent. This thesis will argue that Benjamin’s claims regarding the shivering reader are still very relevant for the contemporary reader, and have continued scholarly relevance in contemporary literary criticism. However, despite these claims of contemporary relevance, it will also be argued that the novel form does have its limitations, such that not all novels, particularly postmodern novels, can be regarded as “valuable” for the shivering reader: it is the possibilities of the realist novel which are of most value because realist fiction
best reflects how the individual ordinarily understands his or her own life and its meaning—an understanding which is often purposefully disrupted by the postmodern novel. Although the reader can look to real people and non-fictional representations of real people (such as auto/biography), the realist novel’s representations of fictional characters is more valuable to the shivering reader, primarily because of the manner in which these characters are represented and because of the freedom the novelist has in his or her representation of their characters. Finally, this thesis examines the rhetoric of the novel and discusses the ways in which the novelist influences and shapes the reader’s evaluation of a character’s life by his or her choice to either exclude or include certain events from the character’s story—choices which promote the meaningfulness of some events whilst deflects others.
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Introduction: The Death of God and the Shivering Reader

You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.
—Albert Camus

If God did not exist, everything would be permitted.
—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

I must choose.
—Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea

This thesis begins with a question—in itself not immediately or eminently profound—which has been both asked and answered many times. The question is: What is the value of the novel to its reader? The same question may be posed more simply: Why does a novel reader read? Of course, since the latter half of the twentieth century, questions such as these have often been avoided by literary theorists; indeed, questions of motives for reading are rarely raised by contemporary literary scholars. These questions are also problematised by the continued practice of questioning the concept and criteria of evaluation itself. And yet, as Rita Felski suggests, they still retain a “shadowy presence among the footnotes and fortifications of academic prose.”¹ This would imply that questions relating to why a reader reads still do have scholarly relevance and answers can still be proposed. To begin such an investigation, we can look to two literary theorists—Q. D. Leavis and Felski—for their proposed answers. In

¹ Felski, Uses of Literature, 14.
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_Fiction and the Reading Public_—a book published almost eighty years ago—Q. D. Leavis proposed four general reasons why people read. The first two are “to pass time not unpleasantly,” and “to obtain vicarious satisfaction or compensation for life.” Both answers are very common and need little explanation; suffice it to say reading for aesthetic pleasure is a universal pastime, and reading to obtain vicarious satisfaction is a well-documented phenomenon, evidenced by characters such as Don Quixote, Catherine Morland, and Madame Bovary.

Arguably more interesting, however, are Leavis’s third and fourth reasons for why a reader reads. The third is that readers had a desire to “obtain assistance in the business of living”—assistance which was “formerly the function of religion.” This reason can be understood as the consequence of the ever-increasing secularisation of modern society, bringing with it the further consequence that readers no longer know the answers to the various questions of “life.” Leavis claims that readers of all strata of literature are alike in very little but a genuine sense of something wrong with the world. They expect the novelist to answer real questions (in the form of What should I . . . ? and How should I . . . ? and Is it right to . . . ?)—in effect, to help them manage their lives by dramatising their problems and so offering a solution, by lending his support to their code of feeling and generally by expressing their own half-conscious or perplexed “feelings about” Life.

This is to say that readers read to answer the questions and the problems of everyday situations encountered in their everyday lives; questions which may relate to moral or ethical problems, but which may also relate to how they are to understand their own emotions and feelings.

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2 Q. D. Leavis derived her answers from a survey sent to sixty novelists of which twenty-five replied.
3 Q. D. Leavis, _Fiction and the Reading Public_, 48.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 69.
6 Ibid., 69–70.
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The fourth and final reason described by Leavis is that readers read “to enrich the quality of living by extending, deepening, refining, coordinating experience”:

The best that the novel can do, it may be suggested, is not to offer a refuge from actual life but to help the reader to deal less inadequately with it; the novel can deepen, extend, and refine experience by allowing the reader to live at the expense of an unusually intelligent and sensitive mind, by giving him access to a finer code than his own.

This description can be understood in at least two ways. Firstly, Leavis implies that the novelist—the skilled and revered novelist—sees both the world and other human beings through an “unusually intelligent and sensitive” lens—a lens to which novel readers do not have access except when they are reading the novelist’s novels. Indeed, it is often assumed that the skilled and revered novelist reads and understands human beings’ idiosyncrasies and nuances better than most. In this way, the novel can be seen as a means to a new insight for the reader into a perplexing world but also helps formulate sustained and coherent images of others in the world and understand how they too “experience” the world. The second way of understanding how the novel extends, deepens, refines, and coordinates experience relates to the common assumption that the novelist has had many experiences—life-experiences—which he or she in turn conveys to their readers through their novels and their characters. In other words, the “intelligent and sensitive mind” of the novelist is also a fount of life-experience from which readers can draw upon and enrich their own life-experience. One example (amongst innumerable examples) of a “novelist of experience” is Polish-born novelist Joseph Conrad who, as a sailor and master-mariner, was privy to a wide range of experiences throughout the world. Many of these experiences were in some way or other represented in his novels such as his earlier work *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1898) which was based on his own voyage from Madras to Dunkirk, and his

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7 Ibid., 48.
8 Ibid., 73–74.
9 Hochman, *Character in Literature*, 63.
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novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902) which was based on his own Congo expedition.11 Through his novels, Conrad “gives” the reader his experiences; he extends and deepens the reader’s experience with a worldly-wisdom gained only through life-experience.

These reasons described by Q. D. Leavis provide a sound cornerstone for answers to the question of why a reader reads. However, in her book *The Uses of Literature* (2008) Rita Felski—our second theorist—examines the question of why a reader reads from a more contemporary and critical perspective; more specifically, she examines the question from the theoretical shadows of the “high theory” of the mid 1960s, 70s, and early 1980s. Felski also proposes four reasons—some of which can be likened to Leavis’s descriptions—but goes much further in her analysis by justifying the importance of each of the given reasons for reading, or “uses” of literature, in light of high theory.

The first use described by Felski is *recognition*. Recognition takes place when we recognise ourselves in the lives and actions of the characters we read about. It is in recognition that likeness and difference come together, such that we recognise ourselves by looking to others. Felski suggests that claims such as this have come under scrutiny from critics who argue that the endeavour to know others in order to better know ourselves is a form of an unethical objectification.12 Another criticism stemming from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is that any form of recognition is essentially a mirrored (mis)representation which begins in our infancy at the mirror-stage of our development.13 However, Felski argues that recognition is a very useful element of literature as we can recognise ourselves in a very new and different way and can attain a “less flawed perception” of ourselves.14 As Felski states:

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11 Ibid., 25.
12 Such as Levinas, Docherty, and Althusser,
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Recognition is not repetition; it denotes not just the previously known, but the becoming known. Something that may have been sensed in a vague, diffuse, or semi-conscious way now takes on a distinct shape, is amplified, heightened, or made newly visible. In a mobile interplay of exteriority and interiority, something that exists outside of me inspires a revised or altered sense of who I am.\(^{15}\)

In recognising ourselves we may also feel a sense of affiliation stemming from the solace and relief of knowing that there are others in the (fictional) world who think or feel like me.\(^{16}\)

The second use of literature is *enchantment* which is characterised by “a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter.”\(^{17}\) This description is very similar to Leavis’s description of vicarious reading; however, as Felski states, Leavis’s description of being “enCHANTed” is, in contemporary criticism, to be “rendered impervious to critical thought, to lose one’s head and one’s wits, to be seduced by what one sees rather than subjecting it to sober and level-headed scrutiny.”\(^{18}\) But as Felski suggests, enchantment is not bewitchment, leading to the confusion of fiction and reality; instead, it can be a very rich and sensuous aesthetic experience. Enchantment is also a very “real” reason for reading and is a desire that we cannot necessarily control or explain: “enchantment matters because . . . people turn to works of art . . . to be taken out of themselves, to be pulled into an altered state of consciousness.”\(^{19}\) Enchantment is significant because it is something that most readers “do.”

Felski’s third reason relates to gaining knowledge of the world beyond the self; it is knowledge about “people and things, mores and manners, symbolic meanings and social stratification.”\(^{20}\) Again, this “use” has been somewhat undermined throughout the

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 33.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 54.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 56.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 76.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 83.
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history of fiction and art in that the work of art’s “capacity” for knowledge of reality is illusory, and counterfeit. However, Felski offers a counter-claim:

One motive for reading is the hope of gaining a deeper sense of everyday experiences and the shape of social life. Literature’s relationship to worldly knowledge is not only negative or adversarial; it can also expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are.21

This understanding is very similar to that of Q. D. Leavis’s description of the novelist’s ability to deepen, extend, and refine our experience of the world. But it is Tzvetan Todorov who explains this reason most eloquently:

If someone asks me why I love literature, the answer that I immediately think of is that literature helps me live. I no longer seek in literature, as I did in adolescence, to avoid wounds that real people could inflict upon me; literature does not replace lived experiences but forms a continuum with them and helps me understand them. Denser than daily life but not radically different from it, literature expands our universe, prompts us to see other ways to conceive and organize it. We are all formed from what other people give us: first our parents and then the other people near us. Literature opens to the infinite this possibility of interaction and thus enriches us infinitely. It brings us irreplaceable sensations through which the real world becomes more furnished with meaning and more beautiful. Far from being a simple distraction, an entertainment reserved for educated people, literature lets each one of us fulfil our human potential.22

The final use described by Felski is literature’s ability to “shock.” Shock does not simply mean to horrify or instil fear, nor does it refer to the (still) shocking sexual explicitness of Marquis de Sade’s Philosophy in the Boudoir (1795), or the violence and sexual explicitness we find in Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho (1991), or the drug-

21 Ibid., 83.
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use in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993). Shock is there to destabilise and unnerve the reader and, as such, is very much in antithesis to enchantment:

Instead of being rocked and cradled, we find ourselves ambushed and under assault; shock invades consciousness and broaches the reader's or viewer's defences. Smashing into the psyche like a blunt instrument, it can wreak havoc on our usual ways of ordering and understanding the world. Our sense of equilibrium is destroyed; we are left at sea, dazed and confused, fumbling for words, unable to piece together a coherent response.²³

Shock can also be seen as the ability of literature to awaken our senses from the (false) tranquillity of our understanding of the world, our beliefs, and truths—some long-held and ossified; only the “blunt instrument” of shock can break them, all for the benefit and enlightenment of the reader.

Comprehensive in themselves as Leavis’s and Felski’s answers are to the question of why a reader reads, a more insightful answer may be found in an essay written not too long after Leavis’s work. In his essay, “The Storyteller” (1936), Marxist literary critic Walter Benjamin²⁴ made the following suggestion: “What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.”²⁵ In Benjamin’s reading, it is the unknown nature of death which is the cause of concern to the reader—is cause for the reader to “shiver”—it is a *Mysterium tremendum*, or as Jonathon Strauss eloquently puts it: “Part of the horror of death [is] its terrible intellectual poverty.”²⁶ The reader, therefore, looks to a novel’s written representations of a character’s death-scene for the “warmth” of some understanding of the phenomenon of death. However, for Benjamin it is more than just the unknown nature

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²⁴ Describing Walter Benjamin merely as a Marxist literary critic somewhat undermines his “plurality.” Indeed, as Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osbourne claim in their introduction to *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy*, “There are [many] Benjamins: Benjamin the Critic, Benjamin the Marxist, Benjamin the Modernist, Benjamin the Jew. . . . Behind each of them, however, in one way or another, stands Benjamin the philosopher.” A. Benjamin and Osbourne, eds., *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy*, x.
of death that draws the shivering reader to the novel: for Benjamin, the death of the Other—other people—and the death of what I will call a “fictional Other”—fictional characters—is also the foundation for some understanding of the “meaning of life.” As Benjamin somewhat offhandedly states: “The ‘meaning of life’ is really the centre about which the novel moves.”

“The nature of the character in a novel [is that] the ‘meaning’ of his life is revealed only in his death.” Benjamin claims that the novel reader—specifically, the modern reader—is shivering or “anxious” because of an absence of understanding of the meaning of life, and is therefore drawn to the novel in the hope of warming his or her shivering lives with wisdom and understanding which is revealed by the dying character. Thus, the value of the novel is that it alleviates the anxiety that the shivering reader may feel towards the unanswered question: What is the “meaning of life”? In many ways this one reason permeates and, indeed, transcends most, if not all, of both Leavis’s and Felski’s claims about reading.

However, unlike Leavis and Felski, Benjamin’s emphasis is specifically on the importance of a novel’s characters; more specifically again, his emphasis is on the importance of representing the lives and deaths of individual characters—the embodied ethos of (isolating) modern society. Of course, any emphasis on character would, today, in contemporary literature and criticism, be seen as somewhat contentious considering the tendency of novelists, literary critics and theorists to marginalise the role of character in fiction. As Hochman states (writing in 1985):

Character has not fared well in our [twentieth] century. . . . Over the past fifty years the characters of literature have, in the works of our most innovative writers, often been reduced to schematic angularity, vapid ordinariness, or allegorical inanity. The great writers of early modernism fulfilled the Romantic program of individualism and created a
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gallery of unprecedentedly complex characters, but their heirs have deliberately
subordinated the role of character in their work. . . .

. . . Postmodernist writers not only challenge the cogency of character as a category
but actively work to dismantle it as an operative element in their stories.  

Writing in the 1950s, Nathalie Sarraute also describes how today’s reader lives in an
“age of suspicion.” The reader is suspicious of what a novelist can tell and, as such, the
reader is unable to “believe” in the novelist’s characters. One may question the value
of such fictions to the shivering reader if the reader is both anxious and suspicious—
the reader is anxious of his or her meaninglessness and yet is inconsolable because of
his or her suspicion of the warmth the novel and its characters may bring. The
continued mistrust and marginalisation of character is a consequence of
postmodernism’s rejection of the notion of the individual subject and of the “I”
philosophy tradition of Descartes, Kant, and Husserl—a rejection exemplified in
Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory of the mirror-stage, where one’s personal identity—that
of a unified and coherent self—is merely an image and only comes to exist in social
contexts when it is seen and addressed by others. Moreover, since language “belongs”
to society and thus the child must learn to speak of his or her self from the position of
the Other—from outside the self.  

Lacan’s idea of identity as an image—a “signifier”—is very much connected to
the emergence of structuralism which also had a profound effect on the notion of
individualism and character. For structuralists, the meanings of human actions and
productions are made possible because of an underlying system of distinctions and
conventions. These meanings come from outside the subject and have meaning only in
terms of the system in which they appear:

30 Hochman, Character in Literature, 13–14.
32 Harland, Superstructuralism, 70.
33 Ibid., 38–39.
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Once the conscious subject is deprived of its role as source of meaning—once meaning is explained in terms of conventional systems which may escape the grasp of the conscious subject—the self can no longer be identified with consciousness. It is “dissolved” as its functions are taken up by a variety of interpersonal systems that operate through it.34

Thus, for structuralists, the notion that characters are distinguished, autonomous wholes—that characters “live”—is a myth and merely reflects a bourgeois ideological prejudice.35 To this myth we may add Hélène Cixous’s claim that the concept of character is “the product of a repression of subjectivity,” and acts as a mask for this repression.36

Lastly, but not finally, there is the emergence of the decentred subject, described by Frederic Jameson in his Marxist approach to individuality. Jameson suggests that “the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual”—reflects the dissolution of the “once-existing centred subject, in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family into a world of organisational bureaucracy.”37 The autonomous individual belonged to modernism—a period which idealised the spirit of individual capitalism and subsequently the concept of the possibility of unique, personal style and avant-gardism. The late-capitalist, postmodern “subject” can no longer invent a unique, personal style—if indeed there ever was such a thing as a unique, personal style—but must imitate styles giving us the practice of pastiche.38 For Jameson there is no individuality in reality or in art or literature and, indeed, in its characters.

From this brief description it is evident that discussing the concept of individuality and the importance of character is somewhat anachronistic and inevitably flawed; however, the line of argument that this thesis will take, firstly with regards individualism, will be very much an “I” philosopher’s perspective—an existential

34 Culler, Structuralist Poetics, 28.
37 Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, 15.
38 Ibid. 15–17.
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perspective—similar to that of Hazel E. Barnes—the Sartrean theorist and English translator of Sartre’s works—and her critical response to the postmodern concept of the fragmented and decentred self:

I do not go along with the notion, current today, that no individual subject exists within us, that our psychic core is only a set of fragmented structures imposed on us by our social environment. . . . I do not hold that what we call the self is the product of discourse, a linguistic convention, a reflecting pool of otherness. . . . I think Sartre is right in claiming that a free, prepersonal consciousness forms a self (or ego) by imposing a unity on its own experiences and reactions to them, past and present.39

From an existential perspective, there is a conscious sense of individuality in the postmodern world—one that we “feel” in its unity and freedom.

With regards to the central role of character in this thesis as a valuable, fictional representation of the Other for gaining some understanding our own lives, we can look firstly to Hochman’s description of the “reality of character in literature”:

What links characters in literature to people in life, as we fabricate them in our consciousness, is the integral unity of our conception of people and of how they operate. I, indeed, want to go further . . . by holding that there is a profound congruity between the ways in which we apprehend characters in literature, documented figures in history, and people of whom we have what we think of as direct knowledge in life. In my view, even the clues that we take in and use to construct an image of a person are virtually identical in literature and in life.40

When we look to others in the real world we construct an image of them in the same way as we construct an image of a historical figure documented in an auto/biography or a character in literature. It is this image of a meaningful life that the reader uses to better understand the meaning of his or her own life.

39 Hazel E. Barnes, The Story I Tell Myself, xvii.
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More recently, Felski makes a similar claim regarding the reality of the importance and use of fiction particularly in light of the dwindling trend of high theory:

There is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics that a shape of thought has grown old. We know only too well the well-oiled machine of ideology critique, the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves that add up to a hermeneutics of suspicion. Ideas that seemed revelatory thirty years ago—the decentered subject! the social construction of reality!—have dwindled into shopworn slogans; defamiliarising has lapsed into doxa, no less dogged and often as dogmatic as the certainties it sought to disrupt. And what virtue remains in the act of unmasking when we know full well what lies beneath the mask?"41

The question Felski asks is what are we losing in this “permanent diagnosis” of literature? Indeed, what are we losing if we can no longer look to fiction for answers to our questions of meaning simply because theoretically there is no such thing as individualism, subjective meaning, and characters who reflect these once innate and unquestionable characteristics? It may be argued that the questions of the past and the value of the past cannot be dismissed as easily as contemporary theory would have us believe. As will become clear, this thesis reflects a continual oscillation between the present and past (a postmodern longing for the past?), and a penchant for the anachronistic and the nostalgic. It is also a thesis founded on the “reality” of character and the consciousness of the self as an individualistic self. In doing so, there is a less than subtle endeavour to revitalise some past theories and values such as the primacy of characters or “the reality of character,” but also the reality of a sense of individualism, and a sense of endings. This is not a manifesto to end the progression of theory, which, as Terry Eagleton suggests in After Theory, cannot be done, but a reflective pause in the aftermath of high theory.42

40 Hochman, Character in Literature, 36.
41 Felski, Uses of Literature, 1.
What, then, is the answer to the unanswered question: What is the meaning of life? — the meaning that Benjamin suggests the novel reader is anxiously searching for. But where to begin, for a question such as this would often leave even the most gab-gifted speechless. This is because the question of the meaning of life is one of the biggest questions, if not the biggest question that anyone — anyone who has felt anxious, confused, or unsure of the meaning of their life — may ask of themselves. Indeed, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus claims that the question of meaning is not only the biggest question that one could ask oneself, but is also the most urgent. Camus writes:

> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest — whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories — comes afterwards. These are games; one first must answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.

> If I ask myself how to judge that this question is more urgent than that, I reply that one judges by the actions it entails. I have never seen anyone die for the ontological argument. Galileo who held a scientific truth of great importance abjured it with the greatest ease as soon as it endangered his life. In a certain sense, he did right. That truth was not worth the stake. Whether the earth or the sun revolves around the other is a matter of profound indifference. To tell the truth, it is a futile question. On the other hand, I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living.

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(what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying). I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions.\(^\text{43}\)

For Camus, an answer to the question of the meaning of life is important because it is a question that, having been answered or, better, having the possibility of being answered, gives each of us a reason to live.

However, the question that must be asked so urgently is understatedly complex as it is not necessarily one specific question that one asks—it is to ask oneself a number of interrelated questions. The only concession to this complexity is that all permutations of the question “What is the meaning of life?” essentially relate to three categories of existence: the universe (or the world); the human race; and the individual. These three categories give us the manifold “questions” of meaning: What is the meaning of human life in relation to the universe? Why does the universe exist? Why is there something rather than nothing? Why do I exist?\(^\text{44}\) This last-mentioned permutation of the question of meaning is of special significance as from the early beginnings of the modern world, through to contemporary society and the modern/postmodern world, the question of meaning has increasingly become a question centred on the individual and the individual’s particular meaning. Consequently the question of meaning can be further refined to: What is the meaning of my life? What is the meaning of my life in relation to the universe? Indeed, if we consider Camus’ claims, the question of meaning is specifically that of our individual selves as it is we who ask ourselves the question of meaning. We do not ask the question of the meaning of the universe, or of the world, or of human existence—we ask the question of our own, individual existence. It is the individual who decides whether life is worth living. It is the individual who chooses suicide in the face of a despairing sense of “meaninglessness.” This can be said to be the foundation of Camus’ stress on what he claims to be the fundamental problem of philosophy: the question of meaning is urgent as it holds the key to a reason for each of us to live.

\(^{43}\) Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, 1–2.
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The Death of God and the Absence of Meaning

This sense of urgency—the urgency, but also the necessity—to anxiously question and search for our individual meaning has not always been as "problematic" as it has been in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, indeed, today, as is somewhat evidenced by the renaissance of existential thought and the "use" of existentialism. The reason for the beginning of this urgency can be essentially pin-pointed to one very significant religious, scientific, and philosophical "event": the "death of God." It is this event which best describes the "culmination" of the process of Western secularisation. His death was "officially" declared by German existential philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1882) in his parable of the madman, who, in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and, jumping in the midst of the crowd, cried: "'Whither is God? . . . I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.'" The reasoning behind Nietzsche's declaration, and the significant consequences of this event in Western philosophy's understanding of the question of the meaning of life, is expounded by Julian Young in *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*. Young claims that before the death of God the meaning of life was understood through the theistic grand-narrative of Christianity, which, before modern times, dominated Western thinking. As such, the meaning of life was not talked about or questioned: the meaning of our individual lives was thought to be a universal meaning such that each "individual" had the same meaning of life as every other individual. This universal meaning was also independent of choice, which is to say that the meaning of life was objectively conferred: it was "simply given to us as something written into the

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45 See Cooper's preface to the second edition of *Existentialism*,
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The answer to the question of meaning was also "obvious" and "self-evident," such that the question of meaning was a "non-issue"; there was no need to question one's life's meaning as it was of none of one's concern. Therefore, the question of meaning was not a cause for what may be deemed "serious" existential anxiety. But, of course, the domination and authority of traditional, medieval Christianity began to be challenged, particularly by two very important historical figures and their theories: the great Renaissance thinker Copernicus (1473–1543) and his heliocentric theory of the Earth's movement; and Charles Darwin (1809–1882) and his theory of evolution and natural selection. It is primarily because of these two theories that the modern, secular world began to take shape and the Church's universal, objective meaning (which was hitherto unquestionable and self-evident) began to be questioned, and existential anxiety concomitantly began to rise. Indeed, Nietzsche's declaration not only signified a new sense of meaninglessness in the absence of theistic, objective meaning, but also a growing sense of anxiety in the face of meaninglessness—anxiety which is akin to what proponents of existential philosophy describe as the anxiety of our "abandonment" in the world. As German existential philosopher Martin Heidegger claims, we are anxious because we are "thrown into existence"—we are thrown into the world without choice, without instruction, or pre-given direction, and without meaning. Moreover, we are each individually "alone" in our "thrownness." Thus we are anxious not only because of the absence of objective meaning but because of the absence of subjective meaning.

What this description suggests is that the shivering reader’s anxiety towards the question of the meaning of life and the need to look to fiction for answers to these questions is a symptom of an increasingly secular, post-enlightenment, modern world; a world that, in its most dramatic sense, is "abandoned by God"—where "God is dead" and where the grounds of meaning have been torn asunder. Anxiety comes from the

48 Ibid., 85.
49 Ibid., 21.
50 For a more detailed discussion on the impact of the two theories, see Bertrand Russell's Religion and Science.
51 Heidegger, Being and Time, 276H.
reader’s confrontation with this “blank mystery of existence,” or what Søren Kierkegaard calls the “yawning abyss” where answers were once known. The reader is anxious because he or she is yet to “discover” and understand what it is that makes their lives meaningful.

And as Benjamin suggests the meaning of life is discovered, it is revealed, but it is revealed only in death. Indeed, Benjamin describes how “a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it.” Benjamin seems to suggest that it is only to the dying or, more specifically, “the imminently dying”—the moribund—that the “true,” “definitive,” or, possibly “authentic” meaning of their lives is revealed. It is a “revelation” of meaning—a disclosure of the meaning of the past which the dying were previously unaware, and only “now,” in death, understand with a new sense of clarity and with newfound insight and wisdom. Thus, until death, the meaning of life remains somewhat of a mystery and is a cause for what is essentially existential anxiety—anxiety about what an undisclosed future will hold.

*The Creation of Meaning*

But this revelation of meaning is not something to be merely waited for as if we were rendered somewhat impotent by our perplexity, just as we do not necessarily “wait” for death. Indeed, the revelation of meaning can be seen as a “destination,” just as Nietzsche’s “true world” is a destination, reached by a particular path that we must

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54 There is of course “anxiety” in the face of an existing yet “hidden” God. In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida describes how in Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians 2:12, “the disciples are asked to work toward their salvation in fear and trembling. They will have to work for their salvation knowing all along that it is God who decides: the Other has no reason to give to us and no explanation to make, no reason to share his reasons with us. We fear and tremble because we are already in the hands of God, although free to work, but in the hands and under the gaze of God, whom we don’t see and whose will we cannot know, no more than the decisions he will hand down, nor his reasons for wanting this or that, our life or death, our salvation or perdition.” Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 57.
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each choose. Which path we should choose to reach this destination is the source of perplexity. We must choose one path amongst many with the hope that the end of the path will be our envisioned meaningful destination. Here, it can be said that we are properly entering the discourse of existential philosophy, where a central principle is that, in the absence of theistic, objective meaning, we each have the freedom to create our own individual, subjective meaning—any meaning, any path, we so choose—and have absolute responsibility for our lives being meaningful. This is to say that we can alleviate our anxiety—and the sense of “nihilistic” despair and perplexity—by creating something from the supposed nothingness of existence. Young claims that the freedom to create our meaning is one of Continental philosophy’s responses to the death of God, and “to the threat of nihilism—to the appearance that life, in the absence of the true world, is meaningless.”\(^5^6\) And, as Young suggests, to create meaning is essentially to create a story of meaning: “What I need to do to overcome my sense of meaninglessness is to construct the story of my life, to construct my ‘personal narrative.’”\(^5^7\) Young claims that in the absence of a “true world,” and the grand narrative of Christianity, it is possible for us to each create our own personal narratives, which is to say that we have the freedom to create our own meaningful life-story. This is, of course, very similar to Jean-François Lyotard’s understanding of the postmodern condition as “incredulity toward metanarratives”\(^5^8\) and the privileging of “little” narratives over “big” narratives.\(^5^9\) In the absence of big, “meaningful” narratives, it is our individual responsibility to both create our own little (though not insignificant) narratives—it is our responsibility to make our lives meaningful. Young believes that a similar reflection occurred to Nietzsche who claimed that we must firstly “[view] ourselves as heroes”\(^6^0\)—we must each of us see and understand that we can become the heroes of our lives; see that we are free to become the heroes of our lives, so that we may become the

\(^{5^6}\) Young, *The Death of God*, 4.

\(^{5^7}\) Ibid., 85–86.

\(^{5^8}\) Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.


\(^{6^0}\) Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §78. As Young describes: “‘Hero,’ here, does not mean ‘performer of heroic deeds’ (though, of course, heroism might turn out to be the character of my
heroes of our lives. And we must “like” being the hero of our story—a claim expressed by Nietzsche in his aphorism of *The greatest weight* and the “eternal recurrence.” For some, if not many of us, the question as to whether the life we have chosen (and created, and are presently living) is worthy of repetition, may perturb or disconcert. However, both Nietzsche’s and Young’s aim is not to fuel despair, but to assert the necessity for “positive” action, such that, in the absence of meaning, be it objective meaning, or even subjective meaning as it were, we must take the initiative and create a meaningful story in which we desire and esteem the hero of the story: ourselves. We should strive to become who we desire to become.

The existential lineage of Young’s claims can also be deduced from Jean-Paul Sartre’s description of one of the first principles of existentialism, namely “existence precedes essence”:

Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing—as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.

That is the first principle of existentialism.

This passage effectively summarises one of Sartre’s objectives for his very important work *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946) which is to “defend existentialism” against the reproach that it is “an invitation to people to dwell in quietism of despair” and to

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Young, *The Death of God*, 86.

Young, *The Death of God*, 90.


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“regard any action in this world as entirely ineffective.” Sartre also attempts to illustrate that existentialism's first principle is very much a *humanistic* principle which implies that there is no universal human nature, essence, or meaning, but also, and more importantly, that we are *free* to actively create our essence or meaning:

If indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s actions by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism—man is free, man *is* freedom.

Our meaning is not objectively determined by a God, by human nature, or any such innate qualities that exist prior to our existence—we are each subjectively free to choose and create our meaning. It must be noted that this description is not necessarily a political sense of freedom or a call for revolutionary action as is so often assumed; nor does existentialism offer answers to the dilemma of both maintaining a sense of individual freedom and a sense of responsibility for our actions, particularly where others are concerned. Indeed, Sartre was a very political writer; however, as Iris Murdoch claims, the assumption that existentialism is a political movement—particularly a Marxist movement—is essentially a myth, a falsehood. One is free and one is condemned to choose but this freedom and the choices themselves are not necessarily connected to social, civil, or political freedom; I am free insofar as my meaningful choices come from within me—they are egocentric—yet I am responsible.

However, Sartre makes another significant claim in relation to the “determination” of meaning, or, to use Benjamin’s words, the “revelation” of meaning: Sartre states that we define ourselves—our meaning—*afterwards*. In other words, the freedom to create the meaning of our lives does not immediately or necessarily give meaning to our lives. This does not suggest that our present lives are meaningless, only that the “definitive” meaning of life is revealed only through the future. This claim is

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65 Ibid., 23.
66 Ibid., 34.
elaborated by Sartre in his other important work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) where he makes a comparison between the meaning of our lives and our individual *projects* and achievements. Sartre plays on the term *project* in several ways: in one sense it is used in its specifically “existential” context, as a verb, where we are said to “project” ourselves forward, such that we are “perpetually engaged in [our] own future.” In terms of meaning, we pre-outline the meaning of our lives by choosing the meaning we want to be. This choice of meaning is in a sense meaningful; however, only the future can “confirm” or “invalidate” this pre-outlined meaning, this envisioned destination, by conferring a definitive meaning upon it. The second sense of *projection* is that our projection into the future is also comprised of actual projects—the noun form of the term *project* which is used to describe our chosen, pre-outlined, meaningful activities, and their future outcomes. This gives us the seemingly tautological claim that we “project” the meaning of our meaningful “projects.” Sartre does not elaborate on the nature of these projects in any great detail; however, he does describe what he calls our *fundamental project*—the “original projection of myself which stands as my choice of myself in the world.” As Young describes, the fundamental project “is that project which gives unity and meaning to all one’s lesser projects.”

Yet, despite the claim that we are free to choose and create the meaning of our lives—a freedom which may obviate the nihilistic anxiety of our meaninglessness in the absence of God—we are not necessarily “free” from the anxiety of choosing and creating this meaning, especially because the act of choosing a meaningful project does not give life meaning. Indeed, accompanying this freedom and responsibility to create the meaning is the existential anxiety of freedom and responsibility. Sartre prefers the term *anguish* to describe this anxious feeling of freedom and responsibility.

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68 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 558.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 63.
71 Young, *The Death of God*, 132.
72 John Macquarrie claims that *anxiety* is the preferable translation of the German *angst* as it better expresses the emotion that existentialists want to describe. In translations of Søren Kierkegaard’s works, the term *dread* is used, and in translations of Sartre’s works, the term *anguish* is used. Macquarrie says of his use of *anxiety* in his own translation of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, that *uneasiness* or *malaise* might also be equally appropriate. Macquarrie,
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and claims that “man is in anguish”\textsuperscript{73} because of his “condemnation” to choose: “condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.”\textsuperscript{74}

The creation of the meaning of our lives is both our absolute freedom and responsibility; however, we do not choose to be free—we are condemned to be free. Indeed, we must continually choose—we must choose whether to continue the project we have chosen, or to choose a new project. Spanish-born philosopher José Ortega y Gasset makes a similar claim in \textit{History as a System}:

\begin{quote}
Life is a task. And the weightiest aspect of these tasks in which life consists is not the necessity of performing them but, in a sense, the opposite: I mean that we find ourselves always under compulsion to do something but never, strictly speaking, under compulsion to do something in particular, that there is not imposed on us this or that task as there is imposed on the star its course or on the stone its gravitation. Each individual before doing anything must decide for himself and at his own risk what he is going to do.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Life is a task where no meaning or choice is imposed, and anxiety is the face of the risk of a choice which is “unopposed.” The anxiety of the condemnation to choose also relates to the anxious realisation that only we, individually, are concerned for the meaning of our life. We are “abandoned” or “thrown” into the world without instruction—nothing tells us how we are to choose and nothing prevents us from making our choices. As Sartre describes, we are “abandoned” which implies “that we ourselves decide our being. And with this abandonment goes anguish.”\textsuperscript{76} And it is anguish of the possibility that the choices we make may be considered or revealed, \textit{in the future}, to be wrong choices. We are anxious because there is always the possibility of a disparity between the created or intended meaning of our projects and the revealed meaning of

\textit{Existentialism}, 164–65. The term uneasiness may also be the most pertinent term if we consider Walter Benjamin’s use of the term \textit{shivering} to describe the uneasiness of not-knowing the meaning of life.

\textsuperscript{73} Sartre, \textit{Existentialism and Humanism}, 30.
\textsuperscript{74} ibid., 34.
\textsuperscript{75} Ortega y Gasset, “History as a System,” 165–66.
these projects in death. In other words, like the revelations described by Benjamin, the true meaning of our chosen projects—the true meaning of the life we have created—is understood only through an undisclosed future.

But we may also be anxious about the freedom of choice insofar as choosing one possibility is at the same time a negation of other meaningful possibilities. As John Macquarrie states: “Decision is never simply self-fulfilment. It is also self-renunciation. To decide for one possibility is *ipso facto* to renounce every other possibility that was open in the situation.” Thus, we may be anxious at the exclusion of one choice over a range of other choices in terms of “what may have been,” particularly if the intended meaning of our chosen project does not resemble the actual or definitive meaning. Anxiety of the freedom to choose is therefore the anxiety of risk—anxiety that can only be overcome by a leap of faith.

*The Fictional Other*

What becomes evident from the above description is that all of our various forms of anxiety have one common thread, namely that we are anxious of what the *future* may reveal, or, as Benjamin claims, what our death will reveal. It is anxiety of the possible disparity between *intention* and *revelation*, between the actual and the envisioned destination of our chosen paths. And, again, we return to Benjamin and his explanation for why the shivering novel reader reads: to show the reader something, some insight that he or she has not (and cannot have) yet seen. The reader reads to gain some form of wisdom and insight into both the *creation* and *revelation* of meaning—where what was concealed is revealed—and to understand something of the true meaning of the reader’s life before the revelation in dying. This is to say that the shivering reader can look to the novel’s representation of the fictional Other’s innumerable, meaningful projects, and the outcomes of these projects, from which the reader can interpret and

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evaluate the meaning of the fictional Other’s lives and contrast them with his or her own choices and projects. Of course, to warm his or her shivering life, the reader can look outwardly to society and other people for some understanding, just as we do for much of our understanding of the social world; however, the novel and its representation of fictional characters can be considered equally valuable to the shivering reader. Indeed, as I will argue, the novel's representation of the life of the fictional Other is more valuable than the real Other for alleviating the reader’s anxiety towards the meaning of life because of the ironic mode which provides the reader with a more intimate (albeit fictional) representation of the Other’s revelations, as well as the Other’s thoughts and experiences as they choose and create their meaning—thoughts and experiences which are for the most part “inaccessible” in real life.

These claims will be the primary focus of exploration and discussion of this thesis and the following chapters. More specifically, in the first chapter “Evaluation and the Fictional Other” we will examine the role of other people for our individual understanding and creation of the meaning of life. We will also ask the question of what meaningfulness means in terms of achievement, seriousness, and moral value, and we will consider the similarities and disparities between fictional and non-fictional representations of realistic characters. The argument will also be made that the novel, especially the realist novel, is more valuable to the shivering reader than non-fictional discourses.

This first chapter will act as a preamble to the remaining chapters where a more specific focus on the characters’ stories and the representation of these stories will be taken. The second chapter—“The Explicit Revelations of the Dying”—will be an examination of the representation of the explicit revelations of the dying fictional Other—the words, the openly-communicated death-speeches of the imminently dying—which as Benjamin claims are of great value to the shivering reader as they offer the reader an “authoritative” insight into the meaning of life. Here, we will again examine the greater value of fiction over non-fictional discourses such as

77 Macquarrie, Existentialism, 182.
autobiography and biography, specifically in terms of the ubiquity of fictional death-scenes and the greater freedom of the novelist in representing these death-scenes. We will also consider questions of the authority of novelists in their representation of the death of the Other and what effect this has on the value of a text to its reader.

In what will be essentially the second part of this thesis, we will discuss the possibility of the reader’s *implicit* interpretations of the fictional Other’s personal narratives. This is to say that the primary concern of the second part of the thesis is how, in the absence of a character’s explicit dying revelations, does the novel “obliquely” communicate a character’s meaning, thereby implicitly enabling and influencing the reader’s interpretation of a character’s meaning. The nature of implicit interpretation will be introduced in the third chapter—“Implicit Interpretation and Evaluation”—where it will be argued that the personal narrative of a character and the plot of a novel are very much interdependent insofar as it is the choices and actions of the novel’s characters which creates plot and the plot’s “movement.” Indeed, it will be argued that the personal narrative is the template for the story of the realist novel and one cannot be isolated from the other. This conflation of the two “stories” is further evidenced if we consider both the personal narrative and the plot in terms of an Aristotelian definition of a plot as having a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginnings, middles, and ends of both the plot and the personal narrative will be more closely discussed in chapters four, five, and six, respectively. In chapter four—“Beginnings in Personal Narratives and Fiction”—it will be argued that the first event of the story surrounds a specifically “existential” beginning in the character’s story and properly begins the character’s personal narrative and the novel’s story.

Chapter five—“The Middle as the Shaping of Meaning”—will primarily be an examination of how the novelist decides which events must be included so as to create a whole, meaningful story and make the character’s life whole and meaningful, whilst omitting those events which are less significant or inessential for understanding this meaning.
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Finally, chapter six—“The End as Death and Closure”—will be an examination of the influence that the various “ends” of the novel can have on the evaluation of a character—ends in which the character may or may not die within the discourse, or novelistic ends which may be considered open-ended. Here we will examine the impact of these different possibilities on the shivering reader’s understanding of the meaning of life and on how the reader evaluates these characters.

This is an ambitious thesis and, although I have endeavoured to include as many novels as possible, its scope must necessarily have some limitations. One of these limitations is that the central focus is Western European literature—literature arising out of Western and continental philosophy—with a particular emphasis on the nineteenth-century realists. This list will include, amongst others: Lazarillo de Tormes; Cervantes’s Don Quixote; Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders; Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy; Jane Austen’s Emma; Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre; Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary; Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick; George Eliot’s Middlemarch; Leo Tolstoy’s The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Anna Karenina; Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Nostromo; James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses; D. H. Lawrence’s The Rainbow; Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse and Mrs Dalloway; Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nausea; Patrick White’s The Tree of Man; J. D. Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye; Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49; Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children; Annie Proulx’s The Shipping News; Ian McEwan’s Atonement; and Don DeLillo’s White Noise and Falling Man. One must be aware of the one-sidedness of such limitations, and, indeed, the inherent bias of West-European literature—which Franco Moretti suggests is essentially a “canonical fraction, which is not even one per cent of published literature.”78 However, for this thesis, the emphasis is on literature that reflects a particular West-European historico-philosophical view.

78 Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” 55.
The Evaluation of Meaning and the Fictional Other

One of the most important claims made by Benjamin in his description of why the shivering reader reads is his suggestion that we look to other people to derive the meaning of life. This claim may seem contrary to the expressly existential nature of our personal narratives, particularly when we consider existential philosophy’s emphasis on individualism: our own individual meaning is our own individual concern, and is created through our own individual freedom. However, this stress on individuality fails to acknowledge much of existentialism’s focus on the “essential sociality of existence,”¹ and our necessary social relations and interactions with others. Indeed, as Heidegger claims, we are each essentially a “being-with” others which in very simple terms means we exist with others and cannot choose not to exist with others. As David Cooper writes, a person can become a hermit, but even then “the loner does not...
dispense with the existence of others, but chooses to live at a distance from them: hence it remains a life led in relation to others.” The primary significance of our being-with-others relates to how we interpret the world and how we are supposed to act within the world. Heidegger claims that our interpretations are dictated primarily by how others interpret them—how the “they” interpret them. The Other and the “they,” differ in the sense that the Other is a “collective” of Dasein—individual beings—whereas the “they” is a term used to specifically describe the “collective” or “social” interpretation of the world and our being. As Heidegger says of the “they”:

We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they [man] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the “great mass” as they shrink back; we find “shocking” what they find shocking. The “they,” which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.

What this means is that we come to interpret the world and ourselves as the “they” interpret the world. As a consequence, our interpretations can also be described as a levelling down of our possibilities into averageness, which is to say that our possibilities do not stray too far from the “they’s” average possibilities; our possibilities do not stray too far from what is considered valid or not, and that which can be ventured or not. Ortega similarly claims that we derive our understanding of our possibilities from the Other; however, Ortega goes further to say that we even go so far as to plagiarise their possibilities:

[My possibilities] are not presented to me. I must find them for myself, either on my own or through the medium of those of my fellows with whom my life brings me in contact.

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2 Cooper, *Existentialism*, 104.
3 Dasein basically means human being, but Da-sein is also the German phrase for “Being-there.” Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 55H.
4 Ibid., 126–127H.
5 Ibid., 127H.
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invent projects of being and of doing in the light of circumstance. This alone I come upon, this alone is given me: circumstance. It is too often forgotten that man is impossible without imagination, without the capacity to invent for himself a conception of life, to “ideate” the character he is going to be. Whether he be original or a plagiarist, man is the novelist of himself.\(^6\)

Whether we invent or plagiarise our meaningful projects, we invariably look to the Other for direction. But when we say that we look to the Other, we are really saying that we are evaluating the Other—we are evaluating the “meaningfulness” of their lives, and based on these evaluations we choose and create the meaning of our own lives. We derive understanding and insight into what meaning we will create for ourselves, and take comfort in knowing that our choices are much “wiser” and insightful for having done so. Indeed, Cottingham claims in *On the Meaning of Life* that “talk of ‘meaning’ in life is inescapably evaluative talk. To describe an activity, or a life, as meaningful is evidently to approve or commend it.”\(^7\) We choose our projects because we believe they are meaningful—we believe they have value—which is a belief derived from our evaluation of the meaningful projects of others. This does not mean that the Other creates our meaningful lives, nor does it mean, as structuralists would argue, that the Other “unconsciously” creates our individual meanings; instead, the Other, for lack of a better word, “influences,” by varying degrees, our consciously intended creation of meaning. In this way there is also a sense that the meaning of one’s projects are at the same time “universal,” insofar as meaning is derived from other individuals’ factual situations, and relational, insofar as meaning is unique and essential to one’s individual situation.

\(^7\) Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life*, 20.
However, what this derivation of meaning from the Other further implies is that our understanding of our self and our meaning enters into a crude Hegelian master/slave relationship. For Hegel, the master/slave relationship is necessary for the process of recognition of self-consciousness as it is both dependent on and independent of the Other; similarly, for our meaningful choices, the relationship is such that to become the “master” of our choices we must first become “slave” to the Other’s choices, which is to say that to create our own individual meaning we must firstly look to the Other’s meaning and objectively interpret and evaluate these meanings, before subjectively creating the meaning of our own lives. The rub, however, is that these meanings will in turn be evaluated. As such, it can be said that there is a spectre of absurdity—a confrontation between our reasoning and reality—which haunts our meaningful projects and the evaluation of our lives. Jean-Paul Sartre dedicates much time in *Being and Nothingness* to discussing this absurd, dialectical relationship between the subjective creation of meaning and the objective *conferral* of meaning, specifically in relation to the “dead life” of the Other—the life of the deceased. Sartre argues that in death our lives are “all done” and we can no longer change these lives. Our lives become closed objects, specifically in relation to the actions, events, and projects that we have achieved or have endeavoured to achieve. However, Sartre further claims that the life of the deceased is not necessarily closed in relation to the *meanings* of his or her actions, events and projects, because the meaning, or meanings, of the dead life are derived from its preservation and explicit reconstruction in the memory of the “living” Other. As Sartre states: “The unique characteristic of a dead life is that it is a life of which the Other makes himself the guardian.” This is to say that the meaning of the dead life is derived, or, more simply, is *interpreted* and then evaluated by the Other.

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8 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111.
9 Cooper, *Existentialism*, 141.
10 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 562, 564.
11 Ibid., 562.
The Evaluation of Meaning and the Fictional Other

such that the dead life is no longer a “being-with” others but a “being-for-others”\textsuperscript{13} and also an \textit{object} for others.\textsuperscript{14} This transformation is both a form of \textit{dispossession} and \textit{alienation} as the meaning that we each have endeavoured to create is taken from our own hands and appropriated by the living Other.\textsuperscript{15} For Sartre, this dispossession and alienation is a haunting\textsuperscript{16} factor of death as \textit{in life}, one is categorised, judged, by the Other—one is prey for others—and yet, in life, one can still defend oneself against these judgements:

So long as I live I can escape what I \textit{am} for the Other by revealing to myself by my freely posited ends that I \textit{am} nothing and that I make myself be what I am; so long as I live, I can give the lie to what others discover in me, by projecting myself already toward other ends and in every instance by revealing that my dimension of being-for-myself is incommensurable with my dimension of being-for-others.\textsuperscript{17}

In death, however, we are each dispossessed of our freedom to give the lie to what others believe. And it is because of this inevitability that there is very much a haunting sense of anxiety as to how one will be remembered: one may feel anxiety towards the “nature,” the attitude, of one’s dispossession and the objective conferral of meaning. This anxiety is illustrated in Sartre’s philosophical novel \textit{Nausea} (1938), a story centred on a young writer—Antoine Roquentin—who is writing a biography on Monsieur de Rollebon—an eighteenth-century diplomat and traveller. The main action of the story is Roquentin’s battle to overcome his feelings of nausea stemming from the disturbing relationship between himself and the objects around him, but also the anxiety he feels with the realisation that he is free to choose the meaning of his life. But it is in a

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., (emphasis mine).
\textsuperscript{14} Ironically, we not only interpret and evaluate other individuals \textit{as} objects but also base our interpretations and evaluations on the objects that we \textit{associate} with other individuals (such as their clothing, or the car they drive). As Roland Barthes suggests, objects are signs—they are forms of \textit{semiotic} communication—that we “read” when we encounter them in everyday life; and we evaluate the Other from these readings. Barthes, “The Kitchen of Meaning,” 157–58.
\textsuperscript{15} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 564.
\textsuperscript{16} See ibid., 568.
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conversation between Roquentin and his friend, the Autodidact, that we find an example of the anxiety one may feel towards the attitude and evaluation of the Other. The Autodidact confides to Roquentin that he has become a member of the S. F. I. O. Socialist Party and explains why he has made this decision:

“Before taking that decision, I felt such utter loneliness that I thought of committing suicide. What held me back was the idea that nobody, absolutely nobody would be moved by my death, that I would be even more alone in death than in life.”

The Autodidact voices a fear that may be common to many—the fear of not being remembered for one’s actions by those who survive one’s death. More importantly, it is the fear of not being remembered at all by those who survive him, as to be remembered is to be valued in some way. Of course, many people are remembered for their infamy; but the Autodidact does not necessarily care for what the Other will remember him for, only that he is remembered. However, the Autodidact’s thinking has a sense of inauthenticity about it as he is attempting, through his meaningful projects, to create the memories and value judgments of the Other. It is inauthentic but also absurd as the value we each endeavour to create through our meaningful projects cannot be decided by ourselves: it is the living Other who decides as they not only make themselves the guardian of the dead life, but also become the arbiter of the dead life. Just as the living Other interprets and confers meaning onto a dead life, so do they confer value. Moreover, when Sartre claims that the Other makes themselves the guardian of the dead life, he is also making the claim that it is the Other that ultimately decides which persons—which dead lives—it will “protect” and “preserve”:

[To make oneself the guardian of a life] does not mean simply that the Other preserves the life of the “deceased” by effecting an explicit, cognitive reconstruction of it. Quite the contrary, such a reconstruction is only of the possible attitudes of the Other in relation to

17 Ibid., 564. Indeed, the absurdity of this dispossession is that it can all but nullify the authoritative voice of the dying.
the dead life; consequently the character of a “reconstructed life” (in the midst of the
family through the memories of relatives, in the historic environment) is a particular
destiny which is going to mark some lives to the exclusion of others. The necessary result
is that the opposite quality “a life fallen into oblivion”—also represents a specific destiny
capable of description, one which comes to certain lives again in terms of the Other. To
be forgotten is to be made the object of an attitude of another, and of an implicit decision
on the part of the Other. To be forgotten is, in fact, to be resolutely apprehended forever
as one element dissolved into a mass (the “great feudal lords of the thirteenth century,”
the “bourgeois Whigs” of the eighteenth century, the “Soviet officials,” etc.); it is in no way
to be annihilated, but it is to lose one’s personal existence in order to be constituted with
others in a collective existence.\(^\text{19}\)

What Sartre suggests is that some dead lives are considered more valuable to the
Other insofar as they are explicitly reconstructed by the Other. As such they stand over
and above many other dead lives—they are valued, in some way or other, for their
meaningfulness. This is the fear of the Autodidact: to be forgotten by the Other in
death.

The inherent “contingency” of meaning of the dead life—meaning which is
determined by the Other—can also be understood in terms of Sartre’s distinction
between a dead historical being and a living ahistorical being: as a living ahistorical
being, I am not my past, and I am not controlled by my past—my history is not yet
complete and written; therefore, I can undertake new projects for new ends, such that I
remain the “author” of my projects and their meanings. As such, I am always “ahead” of
the Other and able to contradict and undermine the meanings interpreted and
conferred onto my life by the Other. In death, however, I am a historical being-for-
others, and my past is fixed in the minds of the Other, and decided by the Other. This
difference between the ahistorical and the historical being can be likened to the
difference between the written reconstruction of a life by an autobiographer and a

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\(^{19}\) Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 562.
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biographer, respectively: as the autobiographer of my own life, it is evident that my complete, meaningful, ahistorical autobiography is not yet written. I am not yet dead and have not finished “writing.” This is precisely the claim made by Ginés de Pasamonte, in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605–15), who is writing a book on his own life-history. Don Quixote questions Ginés on his book:

“And what is the title of your book?” asked Don Quixote.

“The Life of Ginés de Pasamonte,” replied the man of that name.

“And have you finished it?” asked Don Quixote.

“How can I have finished it,” he replied, “if my life hasn’t finished yet? What’s written so far is from my birth to when I was sentenced to the galleys this last time.”

Ginés de Pasamonte cannot finish his book until he himself is “finished”; he is not yet ahistorical and he, himself, nor the biographer of his life, can write his life. However, in death, the Other—the biographer—remains to categorise the historical dead life—a life which one can no longer defend. A final analogy can be drawn between Sartre’s description of an interpretable, historical death, and Roland Barthes’ famous concept of the “death of the author” which is the claim that the author’s voice within a text is essentially disconnected from the text, such that the author of the text is theoretically “dead.” The consequence is that the author’s intended meaning is no more valuable than the meaning brought to the text by the reader. Barthes explains this theory by analysing one particular sentence from Balzac’s *Sarrasine*: “This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.”

Barthes then asks the question:

Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal

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20 Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 182.
21 Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142.
Barthes alludes to the absence of an authorial identity by questioning who is speaking these claims: Is it Balzac and the multiplicity of his identity, or is it beyond Balzac, to a universal wisdom? Barthes responds with the claim that we can never know the answers to these questions, the reason being that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.

Writing does not act directly on reality—it is not present—and is, therefore, disconnected from the voice, or the origin, of the writing's voice, such that the “author enters into his own death.” Barthes further claims that it is language that speaks or “performs,” and not the author or “me.” Language has no content other than the act by which it is uttered; therefore, language knows only a “subject,” not a “person.” From this explication we can find several pertinent similarities to Sartre’s theory of the dead life. Firstly, in both the text and the dead life, the “author” of the text and of the dead life is dead—theoretically or biologically. The body writing the text and the individual living his or her life has “slipped way,” “disconnecting” them from their text/life. The result is that without the primacy or authority of the “author's” intended meaning of the text/dead life, the responsibility to confer meaning onto the text/dead life is placed on the shoulders of the reader/the Other. As has been stated earlier, this is a haunting factor for Sartre—the meaning of one’s life is in the hands of the Other as a being-for-others. What is more, Barthes claims that the alienation of the author from his or her text is considered somewhat beneficial for the reader as it gives the reader the freedom of

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
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interpretation. In a similar way, Sartre describes an historical dead life as a “gift”—an act of generosity—for the Other, insofar as our lives are complete, pure objects which are “handed over to others.”26 We place ourselves totally at the disposal of others. This transformation into “otherness” in death is significant if we consider that the fictional Other is similarly a “gift” for the shivering reader as the reader can interpret and then evaluate the historical, dead lives of the fictional Other. The fictional Other’s dead lives are a gift because the shivering reader can warm him or herself with wisdom derived from their interpretations and evaluations of the dead fictional Other.

However, fictional characters are not the only gift “within” fiction; indeed, the “real” gift of fiction, it must be said, is the ironic mode of fiction, and its emphasis on the representation of the disparity between appearance and reality, knowledge and ignorance. It is the ironic mode that allows the reader to know more of a character than the reader can know of any real individual. Northrop Frye describes the ironic mode as a mode of representation where the hero of the novel is “inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity.”27 The reader can look down on the hero with insights into the explicit and implicit thoughts and actions as he or she undertakes their intended meaningful projects. It can be said that the ironic mode thus gives the reader the privilege of being the final arbiter of the lives of the fictional Other.

The Criteria of Meaningfulness

But what is that we look for when we evaluate the Other? More specifically, what does “meaningfulness” imply and what is the criteria for meaningfulness—criteria for how we are to evaluate other people’s meanings which will inform our own choices, or meanings which we will plagiarise? Cottingham suggests that one criterion for a

25 Ibid., 142–45 passim.
26 Sartre, Notebooks for an Ethics, 48.
27 Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 34.
meaningful life is that our projects have a certain *profundity* or *seriousness* to them, and that they are not “trivial” or “silly”—that we make an earnest investment in our pursuits. To illustrate this point, we can use Camus’ example of the myth of Sisyphus—the absurd hero, condemned by the gods to ceaselessly roll a rock to the top of a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom. Sisyphus may undertake his task in all seriousness, such that he feels that his task is *subjectively* meaningful; however, for the *objective* gods, Sisyphus’s task is trivial, for what is it to roll a stone up a mountain? Viewed this way, the task is meaningless. A second criterion is that our meaningful projects should be *achievement orientated*.

Again Sisyphus would fail in satisfying this criterion: *subjectively* he is achievement orientated—he desires to push his stone to the top of the mountain, and it is his sole desire; however, *objectively*, his task is essentially an exercise in meaningless, endless toil. Sisyphus’s task will never be achieved and so it must be deemed meaningless. What is more, for our own projects to be deemed meaningful there must also be a sense of *transparency* or *self awareness*.

This is to say that we must be able to grasp what it is that we are doing—we must be of sound mind.

However, even when our actions do fulfil these basic criteria, there is still the question of *aesthetic* meaningfulness, which would depend greatly on the evaluator’s beliefs, attitudes, and values. More importantly, there is also the question of the meaningfulness of the *morality* of one’s actions. For example, Cottingham argues that a Nazi torturer may feel that his life is meaningful as he is achievement-orientated and conducts his projects in all seriousness; an objective evaluation, however, is that the torturer’s actions are not morally meaningful at all, and thus his life is not meaningful. Of course, how these judgements are made will again very much depend on the evaluator’s beliefs, attitudes, and values: a fellow Nazi may indeed deem the torturer’s actions as being extremely meaningful, whereas most people would see no meaning in these actions at all.

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29 Ibid., 22.
The Value of the Fictional Other

It is with these criteria in mind that we look to the Other to understand what it is that makes life meaningful—what projects make life meaningful. We derive insights and wisdom from the Other for the creation of our own meaningful projects. And it is with these criteria in mind that the shivering novel reader can also look to the fictional Other. More specifically, the reader can look to fictional characters of the many forms, both past and present, of the realist novel which has experienced a strong resurgence of late.31 Realist fiction is of particular value because of its emphasis on the verisimilitude of its characters and their stories to those of real people in the real world. Again, this claim is contentious, but it can be argued that the characters of the realist novel are essentially imitations of real people and that the realist novel imitates the form of the non-fictional, literary genres of auto/biography (which includes diaries, confessions, and memoirs) and biography. This claim is evidenced in the precursors of the realist novel—the Spanish picaresque novels—which tried to emulate non-fictional forms of writing and to postulate the same truthfulness as these forms.32 As Ian Watt describes, this was also the goal of the early realist novelists, particularly Daniel Defoe, who “initiated an important new tendency in fiction: his total subordination of the plot to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir.”33 Thus, it can be said that fiction arose from the early novelists’ “desire” to produce a verisimilar imitation of non-fictional discourses which were a sort of benchmark for their own works. But this claim is also significant if we consider that the auto/biography can be considered more valuable than “physical” interaction with the real Other insofar as it often discloses more insights into the life of the subject—insights which are not always made known “publicly.”

30 Ibid., 24.
31 For a more thorough discussion on the resurgence of the realist novel see Coykendall’s introduction to the second volume of the Journal of Narrative Theory’s special issue “Realism in Retrospect.”
However, the question we may ask is whether the fictional imitation of the lives of real people is less valuable than non-fictional, literary representations of the lives of real people, irrespective of the fact that it is fiction? The answer, it would seem, is no, especially when we consider the volume of criticism pertaining to the discrepancies of “fact” and “fiction” within the genres of auto/biography. Much of this criticism is directed to how the stories are crafted and the similarities in technique of the authors of both the fictional and non-fictional genres. One such example of the similarities between the two genres, specifically between fiction and biography, relates to the role of interpretation in the writing of a biography. As A. O. J. Cockshut describes in his analysis of the “art of biography”:

The biographer plunges down into a mass of documents, testimonies and (sometimes) personal memories. He emerges with a view of a man’s character. He then has to submit his interpretation to the pressure of facts. The difficulty of biography as an art lies mainly in this tension between interpretation and evidence. Some nineteenth-century biographers, admittedly, avoided this tension by having no central interpretation. They abdicated in the face of a mass of documents, and tried to let the story tell itself. But stories will not tell themselves; a batch of letters and dates is not a biography. Books written by authors who were uncertain of what they really thought of their subject, or afraid to say, are quickly forgotten.  

Cockshut suggests that, unlike the autobiographer’s first-hand experiences, the biographer must collect not only factual evidence relating to the subject, such as dates and places, but collect and interpret the “non-factual” evidence of the subject’s life—second-hand or anecdotal evidence relating to the subject’s character or personality—before translating this evidence into a complete work. Thus, the information and evidence of the life of the subject is mediated or filtered by the biographer, such that the evidential “truth” of the subject’s life, outside of the “indisputable” facts, is

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predominantly indirect, “objective” truth—evidence which is derived from “outside” of the subject.

The genre of autobiography can also be categorised as a “fictional” genre or as having fictional elements. In his essay “Theory of Genres” Northrop Frye examines how the two genres of the novel and autobiography merge because of the similarity between the novelist’s and the autobiographer’s techniques insofar as the autobiographer’s process of production resembles that of the novel writer:

Most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer’s life that go to build up an integrated pattern. This pattern may be something larger than himself with which he has come to identify himself, or simply the coherence of his character and attitudes.  

What Frye suggests is that the autobiographer and, it would imply, the biographer, select only those events that construct a story—a causal chain of events—much like the novelist constructs the story of the novel.

Philippe Lejeune also examines the similarities and differences between the autobiography and the (fictional) autobiographical novel; however, Lejeune also addresses the claim that works of fiction are in many ways more “truthful,” more profound, and more authentic than autobiography, thereby making them more valuable to the shivering reader. This is particularly evident where comparisons are drawn between a particular author’s autobiographical novels—the author’s fictional works—and his or her own autobiography. For Lejeune, the distinction between autobiography and the autobiographical novel is the “autobiographical pact” which implicitly or explicitly exists between the author and the reader. The pact is the understanding that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist of the autobiography are all identical, and that the author has made a concerned effort to write about, and understand, his or her own individual life, and that the life described by the author is an accurate portrayal and

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bears a resemblance to the events of his or her life. This pact, of course, does not exist between the writer of fiction and the reader. But, as Lejeune argues, the writer of fiction aspires to attain and access the same “truth” sought by the autobiographer, and that fiction disclosures the “personal, individual, intimate truth of the author”\(^37\); thus, it can be said that the author’s autobiographical novels resemble the author’s life—they are autobiographical—if only by degrees. This resemblance—a judgement which is made by the reader—can be “anything from a fuzzy ‘family likeness’ between the protagonist and the author, to the quasi-transparency that makes us say that he is ‘the spitting image.’”\(^38\) This is to say that it is the reader who is responsible for the value and authenticity placed on the fictional text as being implicitly true to the author’s life. Thus, the argument can be made that the fictional works of an author can be seen as being more valuable to the shivering reader because the personal insights within the autobiographical novel are in a sense truer, more profound, and more authentic than the author’s explicit, autobiographical insights. Authors of fiction give more of themselves—more of their beliefs, wisdom, and understanding of the world—as they need not conceal themselves from the harsher, more critical light of non-fiction.

The notion of truth and authenticity brings us to another way of understanding the similarities of fiction and non-fiction, specifically in terms of their value to the shivering reader. As Paul Murray Kendall suggests, the value of any text—factual or fictional—is founded on how well the texts are written:

The writer of fiction, out of the mating of his own experience and his imagination, creates a world, to which he attempts to give the illusion of reality. The biographer, out of the mating of an extrinsic experience, imperfectly recorded, and his imagination, recreates a world, to which he attempts to give something of the reality of illusion. We demand that a novel, however romantic or “experimental,” be in some way true to life; we demand of biography that it be true to a life. There is a difference in meaning between the phrases;

\(^37\) Ibid., 27.
\(^38\) Ibid., 13.
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they join, however, in signifying not “factual” but “authentic”—and authenticity lies not only in what we are given but in what we are persuaded to accept.\(^\text{39}\)

A similar claim is made by Frye in his questioning of the common understanding of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction:

In assigning the term fiction to the genre of the written word, in which prose tends to become the predominating rhythm, we collide with the view that the real meaning of fiction is falsehood or unreality. Thus an autobiography coming into a library would be classified as non-fiction if the librarian believed the author, and as fiction if she thought he was lying.\(^\text{40}\)

If the author is *believed* (even if the text is a falsehood), then the work is non-fiction; if the author is not believed (even if the text is unequivocally true), then it is fiction. From Frye’s and Kendall’s descriptions, it can, therefore, be argued that fictional narratives can be considered somewhat equal in value to the auto/biography in representing the life of the Other, or as is the case, a fictional Other, only if it is a representation of a “realistic” story. The reader of a fictional text must be able to *believe* that the characters of the fictional Other *could* exist, *could* choose, act towards, and reveal the meaning of their lives, just as the real Other could. It is because of the novel’s believability, its verisimilitude, and the blurring of its boundaries with non-fiction, that it may be considered *at least* as valuable as non-fiction.

Based on these descriptions of the similarities between fiction and non-fiction, it can be argued that the novel is at least of equal value to the shivering reader as the auto/biography. However, this being said, we often find that, more often than not, novel readers look to fiction rather than non-fiction for their getting of wisdom and the gaining of life-experience. Indeed, Benjamin claims that, for novel readers, fiction is often the primary source of their life-experiences and understanding of the world around them—it


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is the primary source for understanding “the business of living.” Indeed, when Benjamin says that the reader of a novel actually does look for human beings from whom the reader derives “the meaning of life,” he seems to suggest that readers look to fictional characters before they look to real human beings—before they look to the real world, or non-fictional representations of the real world. Benjamin says this almost as if it were an afterthought, as if he must convince us that readers “actually do” look to human beings, not just fictional characters. For Benjamin, the reason for fiction’s privileged position relates to the isolation of the reader. Benjamin talks of the “isolated reader,” and how the activity of reading is almost always done alone:

A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener.) In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were.41

Novel readers are alone as reading is unmediated: even if others were to read alongside the novel reader, they are still very much alone. This description of isolation is very much symbolic of how the novel reader, especially the middle-class reader, is alone in a social sense, a claim briefly discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, as Richard Wolin describes in his biography of Benjamin, the novel is very much permeated by isolation: “The communal aspect of the artistic process—both in terms of the conditions of its production and of its reception—has disappeared. . . . The novel is produced by solitary individuals and read by solitary individuals.”42 From Felski’s descriptions in the previous chapter, a sense of solitude and isolation is still evident and, indeed, problematic for the contemporary reader. It is the solitary reader who is looking for life-experience, and to understand the world and his or her meaningful place

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within the world. This need to look to the novel as a primary source of life-experience is exemplified by a scene from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1872), where Fred Vincy (a careless, debt-ridden young man) and Mary Garth (the plain and practical young woman whom Fred is in love with) are discussing the nature of relationships between men and women. Regarding this matter, Fred opines: “I suppose a woman is never in love with anyone she has always known—ever since she can remember; as a man often is. It is always some new fellow who strikes a girl.” Mary replies by drawing on the only advice available to her:

“Let me see,” said Mary, the corners of her mouth curling archly; “I must go back on my experience. There is Juliet—she seems an example of what you say. But then Ophelia had probably known Hamlet a long while; and Brenda Troil—she had known Mordaunt Merton ever since they were children; but then he seems to have been an estimable young man; and Minna was still more deeply in love with Cleveland, who was a stranger. Waverley was new to Flora Maclvor; but then she did not fall in love with him. And there are Olivia and Sophia Primrose, and Corinne—they may be said to have fallen in love with new men. Altogether, my experience is rather mixed.”

These fictional characters—Juliet from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1597); Ophelia and Hamlet from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603); Brenda Troil, Mordaunt Merton, and Clement Cleveland from Sir Walter Scott’s *The Pirate* (1822); Edward Waverley and Flora Maclvor from Scott’s *Waverly* (1814); Olivia and Sophia Primrose from Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766); and Corinne from Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne* (1807)—are the primary source of experience from which Mary draws upon—not her own lived experiences, or those that have been told to her by the real Other. Eliot’s possible self-referential style and ironic tone notwithstanding, Mary

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44 ibid.
45 See Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston’s notes on the text in *Middlemarch*, by Eliot, 759–60.
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looks to fiction for her experiences and accepts these fictional texts as “truthful” and valuable.

**The “Superiority” of Fiction**

However, it can also be argued that the novel form is not only as valuable as non-fiction but in fact shows itself to be more valuable than non-fiction. This claim can be made for many reasons of which we will consider three of the most relevant. The first two reasons centre on the novel’s ubiquity, which relates to both the volume of literature that has been produced since the rise of the new novel form, and the types of characters represented in the novel form. The former can be understood if we consider that historical analyses of the English reading public show that in the late nineteenth century (a period which saw the greatest increase in the population and the burgeoning of the mass reading public) between sixty-five and ninety percent of books that were circulated in most free libraries were classified as fiction. This benefited the shivering reader as the novel’s ever-increasing ubiquity presented him or her with innumerable characters, thereby enabling them to draw upon a greater wealth of wisdom and insight. Moreover, as was illustrated by the volume of sales, fictional texts were also more ubiquitous than the non-fictional forms of auto/biography.

But the superiority of fiction over non-fiction lies not only in its quantity of characters but in the diversity of character types—the second reason for its privileged position. The characters of the realist novel were representative of a wide-range of socio-economic backgrounds, and therefore offered the reader a broad collection of varied, subjective perspectives. W. J. Harvey describes how this wide-ranging diversity was very much a result as the connection between the novel’s development and the growth of the bourgeoisie. Harvey states that the bourgeoisie valued “liberalism” and

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46 Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 81, 231.
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had a very liberal state of mind, and acknowledged the plenitude, diversity and individuality of human beings in society and “[delighted] in the multiplicity of existence and allows for a plurality of beliefs and values.”48 This “multiplicity” of existence of characters assured that the fire that warms the shivering reader was increasingly “fuelled” with the representation of the lives of the fictional Other, such that the quantity of diverse characters could be said to yield almost the same warmth as the quality of the representation. What is more, from the earliest examples of the novel form, there has been an abundance of female characters, thereby offering readers the subjective perspective of both sexes. In contrast, the subject of the pre-twentieth century auto/biography was almost exclusively male, and had some form of social status and public importance, both of which were necessary for the auto/biography’s “legitimacy.”49 Further, “autobiography proper [was] perceived to be the right of very few individuals: those whose lives encompassed an aspect or image of the age suitable for transmission to posterity.”50 Thus, the writing of an autobiography was the entitlement of wealthy, famous men, and who were old enough to warrant esteem and conviction from their readers. Similarly, biographies written prior to the twentieth century were concerned only with the most eminent people—men of high action or letters.51 Only in the twentieth century were these precedents called into question, most prominently by Virginia Woolf:

The question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness? He [the biographer] must revise our standards of merit and set up new heroes for our admiration.52

48 Harvey, Character and the Novel, 24.
49 Marcus, Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice, 32.
50 Ibid., 31.
51 Kendall, The Art of Biography, 6.
Woolf challenges the standards by which the biographer attributes the status of "hero"—the standards of worthiness for being the subject of a biography. Indeed, one is reminded of Nietzsche's claim that we must see the hero within ourselves, and, not judge ourselves by the standards of those men deemed worthy by the set standards. And as Nietzsche states, we can see the everyday hero of our lives in art—in fiction, but not necessarily non-fiction:

Only artists, and especially those of the theatre, have given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each man is himself, experiences himself, desires himself; only they have taught us to esteem the hero that is concealed in everyday characters; only they have taught us the art of viewing ourselves as heroes—from a distance and, as it were, simplified and transfigured—the art of staging and watching ourselves. Only in this way can we deal with some base details in ourselves. Without this art we would be nothing but foreground and live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand and most vulgar appear as if it were vast, and reality itself.53

It is in the theatre, and in fiction, that we can see that the everyday character—ourselves—can be the hero of our lives, and create a meaningful life. It is in the theatre and in fiction that we can recognise ourselves—the everyday individual—as the everyday hero. In contrast, non-fictional works of the eighteenth and nineteenth century lack this diversity of everyday subjects from whom readers can look to for answers to their questions of meaning. Indeed, the incommensurability of the lives of the men that are written about in auto/biography and the common reader would further suggest that little of what is communicated in the auto/biography would be applicable to the reader's own life: their meaningful projects are in no way similar to my meaningful projects, and thus hold little value. How can one recognise oneself in a character when there is no commonality between oneself and the characters one is reading about? There is an insurmountable factual and situational distancing between the lives of the common
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reader and the lives of great men. The novel, however, is valuable as it has represented the diversity of characters sought by campaigners such as Woolf, and thus the novel makes it possible to somewhat overcome the distance between the situation of fictional characters and the situation of the reader. Indeed, over its relatively short history, the novel has represented innumerable heroes and heroines alike, from the poorest to the wealthiest, the honourable to the dishonourable, and from the most knowledgeable to the utterly perplexed.

The question left begging is whether this distancing can ever be truly overcome. Is it at all possible for readers to recognise themselves in other people with other factual situations, irrespective of the possible “universality” of wisdom? Indeed, distance is not limited to that which exists between the common reader and great and wealthy men: distance is also apparent if we consider the situational diversity of ethnicity, race, nationality, and social and political beliefs. However, it can be argued that fiction does offer this ubiquity and diversity. Indeed, as Franco Moretti makes evident in his “Conjectures” essays, despite a certain lack of theoretical study, there are “hundreds of languages and hundreds of literatures” which comprise “world literature.”

Thus, the common, “worldly,” reader can draw upon the literary “wisdom of the world”—be it relational or universal wisdom—to better understand the meaning of his or her life.

And yet, it must be noted that, whilst both fiction and non-fiction can offer “real-life” wisdom to the shivering reader, it can also offer no wisdom—a certain absence of wisdom and meaning—because the lives of the subjects and characters can bear no such resemblance to that of the reader. This is especially the case when ordinary, “common” people are thrown into extraordinary and uncommon circumstances. This is to say that the distance between reader and character does not only occur because of ethnicity, race, etc.—there is also the distancing of events—events that cannot be utilised as a sounding pole for how one should live one’s own life. The most obvious

54 See Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature” and “More Conjectures.”
example is the Holocaust and the horrors of Auschwitz. We might say: “The lives of those people in Auschwitz bear no resemblance to our own lives.” We know this through the literature of the Holocaust, the exemplar of which is the semi-autobiographical short stories of Tadeusz Borowski in *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1959). Borowski writes his stories without sentiment and with a knowing indifference. Many of the stories which are set in the Auschwitz concentration camp serve to illustrate how many of the men and women of Auschwitz necessarily created a new grounding for a moral life, and how reactions to extreme situations create extreme behaviours which are not commensurable with behaviours outside these situations. More importantly, the stories show us how the possibilities of the concentration camp victims are incommensurable to one’s own possibilities. In Auschwitz, the will is not to live well but simply to live, and to “live at all costs.” We see this in a scene from the first story “This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman” when a cattle-car of prisoners is about to be unloaded.

It is impossible to control oneself any longer. Brutally we tear suitcases from their hands, impatiently pull off their coats. Go on, go on, vanish! They go, they vanish. Men, women, children. Some of them know.

Here is a woman—she walks quickly, but tries to appear calm. A small child with a pink cherub’s face runs after her and, unable to keep up, stretches out his little arms and cries: “Mama! Mama!”

“Pick up your child, woman!”

“It’s not mine, sir, not mine!” she shouts hystERICALLY and runs on, covering her face with her hands. She wants to hide, she wants to reach those who will not ride the trucks, those who will go on foot, those who will stay alive. She is young, healthy, good-looking, she wants to live.\(^55\)

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\(^{55}\) Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, 42–43.
In this world, there are no longer normal moral divisions between those who act evil and those who are its victims, and there is no “normal” moral compass. Indeed, as the title of one of the stories—“Auschwitz, Our Home”—suggests, the narrator sees Auschwitz is “home” and he looks to it with familiarity, just as you would any normal home. But it is a home, a world, which the reader cannot know except as separated and distanced—it is otherworldly. This distancing is further emphasised by the many juxtapositions within the text such as the description of a soccer game being played whilst a train arrives. Steadily the people emerge from the cattle-cars:

The people sat down on the grass and gazed in our direction. I returned with the ball and kicked it back inside the field. It travelled from one foot to another and, in a wide arc, returned to the goal. I kicked it towards a corner. Again it rolled out into the grass. Once more I ran to retrieve it. But as I reached down, I stopped in amazement—the ramp was empty. Out of the whole colourful procession, not one person remained... Between two throw-ins in a soccer game, right behind my back, three thousand people had been put to death.

In A Double Dying, Alvin H. Rosenfeld states that “such events are discordant, even obscene in their juxtapositions, but everything at Auschwitz exists in gross disjunction with the earlier life; and, seeing things this way, Borowski is sternly correct in his refusal to attempt a resolution between the two.” Here one may read “earlier life” as being similar to the life of the “civilian”—the reader—before Auschwitz, choosing his or her own life. One cannot know the conditions of Auschwitz and one cannot know or contrast or draw upon the lives of those in the concentration camps. These texts are understatedly invaluable for understanding the frightening possibilities of humanity; yet, at the same time, they are outside history and are not valuable to the common reader—the civilian: the situation of those in Auschwitz, and the events that take place

56 Rosenfeld, A Double Dying, 75.
57 Borowski, This Way for the Gas, 83–84.
58 Rosenfeld, A Double Dying, 74
within this world, are unknowable and, thankfully, bear little to no resemblance to the reader’s own situation nor to the reader’s own choices and possibilities.

The Holocaust is one of many exceptions to the claim that both fiction and non-fiction offers the shivering reader the wisdom to draw warmth from. What fiction and non-fiction can offer, however, is ubiquity and diversity. Fiction, in particular, offers the greater diversity of characters, and can therefore be seen as more valuable to the shivering reader than non-fiction. However, fiction can be considered more valuable to the shivering reader than non-fiction not only in terms of who is represented, but in terms of how the characters’ stories are represented, which is the third reason for fiction’s privileged position. As was intimated above, readers of fiction enter into a different relationship with the fictional Other than they do with the real Other: the reader of fiction is not merely evaluating the characters of a novel as if they were people he or she meet momentarily on the street, limited to hearing their explicit communication, or seeing their “public” actions; nor is the reader limited to the imperfect fragments of the living’s memories of the dead life. Instead, the reader has the privilege of evaluating fictional characters from a “superior,” omniscient position, such that the reader can “hear” the characters’ explicit and implicit thoughts, see their “unseen” actions. What is more, the reader can hear and see the characters’ thoughts and actions as they happen, giving the reader what is essentially a “perfect,” documented memory of the events of a character’s life. This is because the story can be told as if it were presently happening, as if it is happening “now” and not as a reconstruction of a life from memory. This possibility of fictional narration is described by Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse* in which he states that all narratives, fictional and non-fictional,

establish a sense of a present moment, narrative NOW, so to speak. If the narrative is overt, there are perforce two NOWs, that of the discourse, the moment occupied by the narrator in the present tense (“I’m going to tell you the following story”), and that of the story, the moment that the action began to transpire, usually in the preterite. If the narrator is totally absent or covert, only the story-NOW emerges clearly. The time of
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narration is then past, except for the present of dialogue and external and internal monologue.\textsuperscript{59}

The auto/biography can be written in both NOW tenses; however, there is essentially a temporal distance between the writing of the event and the experience of the event, such that the memories of the event are somewhat fallible, and no guarantee can be made of their accuracy and authenticity. Indeed, the past of the non-fictional subject of the auto/biography is not present—it does not exist—and is, therefore, questionable in its accuracy. In the novel, however, the story can be narrated from either of the two NOWs. But if the novel is narrated only in the second NOW—a possibility belonging to fiction alone—then there is no temporal distance between the writing of the event and the experience of the event. It is all present. Therefore, unlike the narrator of the auto/biography, the novel’s (absent) narrator can have perfect “memory” of the experience because he or she can describe the action as it happens. As such, the novel essentially guarantees truth, accuracy and authenticity in its representation, and thus provides the reader with a far more detailed representation of a character’s life. Of course, even when the narration is told in the preterite, the “remembered” story is described in far more detail than what can be normally remembered. This disparity is particularly evident when we consider moments in a novel where long pieces of dialogue, exchanged between characters, are remembered perfectly despite having taken place many years ago.

In more recent fiction, or, indeed, metafiction, the implied “truthfulness” of omniscience is called into question and becomes a source of self-reflection. Metafiction or “self-conscious fiction” “systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”\textsuperscript{60} Examples of such texts are Laurence Sterne’s \textit{Tristram Shandy} (1759–67) and Salman Rushdie’s \textit{Midnight’s Children} (1981), where the narrators both regale stories which cannot be known first-hand, whilst also drawing attention to these impossibilities and questioning

\textsuperscript{59} Chatman, \textit{Story and Discourse}, 63.
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their truth. Tristram’s first-person story is primarily centred on his birth (of which he can have no memory of experiencing and knows only by report); similarly, Saleem Sinai—the narrator of *Midnight’s Children*—recounts, in great detail, the many significant events which preceded his very important birth. A more recent example can be found in Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001). Initially, the NOW-story is told in the third-person by an omniscient narrator; however, following an incident where a vase is broken by a teenage Cecilia Tallis and her friend Robbie Turner it is revealed that story is in fact the autobiographical reflection of a seventy-three-year-old Briony Tallis—Cecilia’s younger sister—who is telling the story—still in the third-person—as if she were outside the action. Indeed, she does see the incident at a distance, but before this event, she is spoken of only in the third-person by an “unknown,” omniscient narrator. Writing from the position of her later self, Briony says: “Now there was nothing left of the dumb show by the fountain beyond what survived in memory, in three separate and overlapping memories. The truth had become as ghostly as invention.”61 The thirteen-year-old Briony’s memories have not maintained their vibrancy or accuracy, and so the later Briony must “create” the event—a poor sketch of the past’s reality. In the telling of her “autobiography,” we also see Briony’s compulsion to “produce a story line, a plot of her development that contained the moment when she became recognisably herself.”62 Her autobiographical story must become fiction-like to maintain the façade and, thereby, the “readability” of fiction; non-fiction is only readable (and valuable) if it comes to resemble the narrative of fiction. Once again fiction is privileged over non-fiction, even with the reader’s awareness of McEwan’s ironic underpinnings

*Validity and the Interpretation of Meaning*

The reader’s omniscient ability to hear and see a character’s thoughts and actions as they happen is the dividend of how the fictional Other can be represented. However,

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dthis omniscient superiority has the secondary benefit of evaluative superiority as the reader can (to use Frye's words) look “down” on the novel’s characters. By looking down on the characters, the reader can make a “valid,” *accurate*, and authentic evaluation of the character—the reader can make a superior judgment of the character’s dead life. The accuracy of interpretation is determined by the synthesis of our *objective* interpretation of the dead Other’s meaning with the dead Other’s *subjective*, intended meaning—we must know what meaningful projects were chosen by the deceased to better evaluate their meaning.

Of course, it would be bold to suggest that one could, for the most part, authoritatively know the intended meaning of another’s life, even bolder to suggest that one’s understanding of another person’s life is *identical* with the other person’s intended meaning. We cannot certainly know the Other’s intentions and we cannot certainly know the reasons and the feelings behind their intentions, just as we cannot certainly know another’s grief—we can only empathise and sympathise. Indeed, we cannot *certainly* know why Captain Ahab is chasing Moby Dick; we cannot *certainly* know the mad intentions of Don Quixote; and we cannot *certainly* know the love that Anna Karenina feels for Vronsky which makes her negate her past life. Yet we can estimate their meaningful intentions and we can still make interpretations of their intended meanings. To do this, we must gather “memories”—data—of the dead Other—our own and those of others who knew the deceased—so as to confer a meaning that is both accurate and comparable to their intended meaning. It is a meaning that is agreed upon by those who are interpreting the life of the deceased. But the activity of interpretation of the text/dead life is never really completed and cannot be exhausted in the sense that all interpretations must be seen as partial and part of the continual process of the gathering of partial memories, pieces of stories and anecdotes, such that a collage-like representation is formed; a collage which becomes more refined as new memories and new “subjectivities” come to light. The objective

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62 Ibid.
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interpretation can never match the subjective intention, but it can become more accurate.\textsuperscript{63}

The importance of this fuller understanding and accuracy to the living is that if we make the mistake of conferring only a partial, uninformed, and inaccurate meaning onto a dead life, then, in a way, we are reinforcing the isolation of our understanding—the isolation that we are endeavouring to overcome. Complete freedom of interpretation, and invalid interpretation, somewhat leads back to isolation and perplexity. It reduces the fullness of a life, and, inevitably, its value to the living.

\textit{The Rhetoric of Showing and Telling}

Before we begin a closer examination of the fictional Other and their stories in the following chapters, we must firstly recognise a significant difference between the nature of interpretation and evaluation of the dead life of the real Other and that of the dead life of a fictional character: we must recognise that, unlike the interpretation of the real Other, the novel reader cannot avoid coming into contact (or even conflict) with the authoritative author who has created the intended meaning of a character. The author knows with unquestionable accuracy the intended projects of his or her characters. And the author of a fictional text can also have a significant influence on the reader’s evaluation of the novel’s characters. As will be described, this influence is apparent regardless of whether the author chooses to \textit{tell} the story or merely \textit{show} the story, a distinction which is discussed by Wayne C. Booth in his very important work, \textit{The Rhetoric of Fiction}. Booth states that the author can \textit{tell} the story to us as “direct and authoritative rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{64} Here the influence is explicit and there is no hiding the author’s judgements of his or her characters. But the author can also \textit{show} us the story, a technique where the author has essentially “effaced himself, renounced the privilege of

\textsuperscript{63} This description bears a distinct resemblance to E. D. Hirsh’s description of how an author’s intended meaning of a text can never be known and thus must be seen as an inexhaustible process. See Hirsh, \textit{Validity in Interpretation}, 16, 17, 128.
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direct intervention, retreated to the wings and left his characters to work out their own
fates upon the stage. In this way, the author suppresses all explicit judgements of
the lives of his or her characters, such that his or her influence over the reader's
evaluation of a novel's characters is minimal. The author leaves the reader alone to
evaluate the characters and decide the meaningfulness of a character's life. A pertinent
example of an author who shows her characters, by attempting to represent the pure
subjectivity of her characters, is Virginia Woolf, specifically Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*
which is discussed by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*:

The writer as narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost
everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis
personae. . . . This goes so far that there actually seems to be no viewpoint at all outside
the novel from which the people and events within it are observed, any more than there
seems to be an objective reality apart from what is in the consciousness of the
characters. Auerbach adds that the author has the stylistic possibility of

obscuring and even obliterating the impression of an objective reality completely known
to the author. . . . The author at times achieves the intended effect by representing herself
to be someone who doubts, wonders, hesitates, as though the truth about her characters
were not better known to her than it is to them or to the reader. It is all, then, a matter of
the author's attitude toward the reality of the world he represents. And the attitude differs
entirely from that of authors who interpret the actions, situations, and characters of their
personages with objective assurance, as was the general practice in earlier times.

One is reminded of Stephan Dedalus's definition of the artist, from Joyce’s *A Portrait of
the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), where he states: "The artist, like the God of creation,

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65 Ibid., 7.
67 Ibid., 535.
remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." The reader is left to interpret and evaluate, uninfluenced, the fictional Other, as if the reader were privy to the fictional Other’s “pure,” subjective consciousness. The characters speak explicitly, subjectively, and authoritatively—not the author.

However, whilst privileged to see more than what a novel’s characters can see, an omniscient reader sees no more than the authoritative author is willing to “show.” Indeed, an author cannot help but influence the reader’s evaluation, even if the author’s aim is for pure objectivity. As Booth claims, this influence can be seen even if the author were to choose to simply “re-tell” a story:

Unless the author contents himself with simply retelling The Three Bears or the story of Oedipus in the precise form in which they exist in popular accounts—and even so there must be some choice of which popular form to tell—his very choice of what he tells will betray him to the reader. He chooses to tell the tale of Odysseus rather than that of Circe or Polyphemus. He chooses to tell the cheerful tale of Monna and Federigo rather than a pathetic account of Monna’s husband and son. He chooses to tell the story of Emma Bovary rather than the potentially heroic tale of Dr. Larivière. The author’s voice is as passionately revealed in the decision to write the Odyssey, “The Falcon,” or Madame Bovary as it is in the most obtrusive direct comment of the kind employed by Fielding, Dickens, or George Eliot. Everything he shows will serve to tell; the line between showing and telling is always to some degree an arbitrary one.

In short, the author’s judgement is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it. . . . [We] must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear.⁶⁹

What Booth suggests is that the authoritative author rhetorically tells the reader something of his or her values even when they choose not to tell the reader anything. However, what is also interesting about Booth’s claim is that the choice of the novelist

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⁶⁸ Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 215.
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to tell or, as it were, re-tell a story has strong analogies to the description above of
Sartre’s claims relating to the Other being guardian of the dead life: it is the Other that
decides which dead lives will be remembered and reconstructed. In a similar vein, the
characters of the novel, which are created and given a life by an author, stand out as
having a “valuable” meaningful life which is worth recounting. If we again consider
Booth’s claim, the author’s choices are unavoidably influential: the author’s choice to
write about a character is a form of telling insofar as the author chooses to write about
one particular character instead of another. When we question why the author chose
this way, we are also asking what value the author is suggesting this character has for
our understanding of our own lives. Of course, possible answers to the question of why
an author chose to tell that particular story has been discussed by proponents of
psychoanalytic theory where the focus is on the significant role of the unconscious in
telling a story. Psychoanalytic theorists argue that the reasons why an author chooses
to tell a story is always a result of repressed and “irrational” desires and fears which are
locked away in the unconscious such that the conscious intentions and choices of the
author to tell a story are subordinate to the “true” unconscious intentions. Here it can
be argued that the author is telling the reader something “unconsciously”; but how this
“telling” is interpreted becomes the realm of the reader. One cannot dismiss these
claims easily; however, for the present argument we will assume that there is a
conscious intention and a sense of telling behind the author’s work, regardless of
whether he or she consciously or unconsciously intends to show or tell a story.

Ethics and Responsibility

Before moving on to a more thorough discussion of the value of the fictional Other’s
stories and the rhetoric of the novelist in representing these stories, we must firstly
address the question of the relationship between ethics and literature—a question that,

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in the last few decades, has become of increased interest to literary theorists and philosophers alike. The question here is not whether literature has ethical value, or, indeed, political value—a topic addressed by Marxist critics; it is a question of the author's ethical responsibilities to the reader who is consciously or unconsciously "absorbing" these stories of meaningful (fictional) lives to better inform the creation of his or her own life. Martha C. Nussbaum (writing in 1988) recognised what was, at the time, an absence of ethical theory in literary theory. Nussbaum argues that literature serves a very important role in how we are to live our lives and for answering the original Socratic question: “How should one live”; therefore, the question of ethics is invariably linked to literature:

One of the things that makes literature something deeper and more central for us than a complex game . . . is that it speaks . . . about us, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections. As Aristotle observed, it is deep, and conducive to our inquiry about how to live, because it does not simply (as history does) record that this or that event happened; it searches for patterns of possibility—of choice, and circumstance, and the interaction between choice and circumstance—that turn up in human lives with such a persistence that they must be regarded as our possibilities. And so our interest in literature becomes . . . cognitive: an interest in finding out (by seeing and feeling the otherwise perceiving) what possibilities (and tragic impossibilities) life offers to us, what hopes and fears for ourselves it underwrites or subverts.71

It is because literature speaks about us that it should be subject to ethical inquiry. This can be understood from at least two standpoints: the responsibility of the author to the reader; and the ethics of alterity. The former relates to the author’s rhetorical influence over the reader. To understand this view we can firstly look to Booth who, like Nussbaum, argues that literature’s moral influence over its reader is undeniable:

70 Lucy, Postmodern Literary Theory, 5.  
No one who has thought about it for long can deny that we are at least partly constructed, in our most fundamental moral character, by the stories we have heard, or read, or viewed, or acted out in amateur theatricals: the stories we have really listened to.\textsuperscript{72}

For Booth, this construction of our moral character is primarily a consequence of the author’s intentional or unintentional moral judgements within the work: “I can think of no published story that does not exhibit its author’s implied judgments about how to live and what to believe about how to live.”\textsuperscript{73} The author’s judgements are undoubtedly manifest in his or her story; thus, there must be some form of responsibility on the author’s shoulders. Of course, how the author’s judgements are communicated and the extent of his or her influence is a matter of examining the rhetorical devices (both implicit and explicit) within the text. In \textit{The Company We Keep}, Booth argues that it both the author and the reader are responsible for a text. Ethical responsibility of the reader relates to how the reader is to respond to a text, and that to respond to a text is also to be responsible to a text.\textsuperscript{74} Part of this response is to recognise that what is being told is a fiction—that the reader is dwelling in an “unreal” or “artificial” world; it is also to recognise that one may be “taken over” by a text and one may begin to think the thoughts of another—to be enchanted—but one must return to one’s own thoughts after reading.\textsuperscript{75} The problem of such theories is that what is suggested is that there is an “ideal reader”—one who does not need to be protected from fiction by censors and the like; a reader who is aware that something is being told to him or her, but how they respond to what is being told them is their own responsibility. This is essentially the reader Sartre has in mind when he states: “You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it.”\textsuperscript{76} “You” it can be assumed is every free individual—an ideal reader. We may also argue that an ideal reader

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Booth, \textit{The Company We Keep}, 126.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 140–41.
\textsuperscript{76} Sartre, \textit{What is Literature?}, 35.
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should also realise that one novel is not necessarily the unequivocal fount of wisdom for a meaningful life. One particular novel may indeed be invaluable to the reader, but the reader should endeavour to place it amongst a range of other novels. One may suggest that the result of a more wide-ranging survey is a greater wealth of knowledge and wisdom which can be collated and utilised, just as the wealth of “Otherness” that society offers creates a more consolidated understanding of one’s own possibilities. Of course, this ideal reader does not exist, but it is a model for the kind of reader—the isolated, shivering reader—implied by this thesis, insofar as the shivering reader is looking to the plurality of Otherness to better understand his or her own life.

Like Nussbaum and Booth, Anthony Cunningham, argues that literature has significant ethical implications and can play a valuable role in the reader’s life by “functioning as a kind of ethical filter and powerful diagnostic tool.” Indeed, Cunningham suggests that literature is in many ways more valuable than real, lived experience because it can “provide us with intimate, detailed depictions of life and character that are difficult to come by in everyday experience.” However, with regards to the morality of literature, Cunningham argues that the novel can only serve as a guide for our moral path if it is the “right” novel:

The right kind of novel—one with detailed character portraits of particular people embroiled in complex, meaningful situations—can help us refine our moral vision by giving us a studied opportunity to practice seeing and appreciating diverse ethical loves. Armed with the right works of literature, we can literally read for life.

The question we may well ask is what is the “wrong” kind of novel? Is it the novel that reinforces one’s “unethical” ideas about how to live one’s life?; or is the wrong kind of novel that which portrays an unethical answer to one’s questions about how to live one’s life? Here we find the difficulties in demarcating what is deemed right and wrong.

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77 A. Cunningham, The Heart of What Matters, 84.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 84–85.
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ethical and unethical, in literature. This definition of “right” may indeed be similar to Leavis’s criteria for the most important novels of the “great tradition” which “are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity.”80 And yet, the difficulty with this argument relates to how this “right” kind of novel “establishes” itself. Again we are within the realm of rhetoric and responsibility and again it would seem that responsibility is placed on the shoulders of the author to create the right kind of novel. But it could also be suggested, as Booth does, that the reader has a responsibility to other individual readers insofar as the reader should

make public [his or her] appraisals of the narratives [they] experience, particularly [their] ethical appraisals. . . . [The] most important of all critical tasks is to participate in . . . a critical cultural, a vigorous conversation, that will nourish in return those who feed us with their narratives.81

It is thus critical participation which establishes the right and wrong kind of novels—a consensus of value for the shivering reader.

The second standpoint for the question of ethics is the ethics of alterity—a concept discussed most prominently in the work of Levinas and his description of the irreducibility of the Other to the “same” (or the self) and the problem of trying to diminish the alterity of the Other by identifying them as objects which exist only in relation to me and for me, and not as Beings-for-themselves.82 Felski explains Levinas’s ethics of alterity in her chapter on recognition:

As an advocate of otherness, Levinas warns against the hubris of thinking we can ultimately come to understand that which is different or strange. Ethics means accepting the mysteriousness of the other, its resistance to conceptual schemes; it means learning to relinquish our own desire to know. Seeking to link a literary work to one’s own life is a

80 F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition, 18.
81 Booth, The Company We Keep, 136.
threat to its irreducible singularity. . . . To recognise is not just to trivialise but also to colonise; it is a sign of narcissistic self-duplication, a scandalous solipsism, an imperious expansion of a subjectivity that seeks to appropriate otherness by turning everything into a version of itself.83

One is reminded here of Ortega y Gasset’s claim that we each plagiarise the Others’ meanings: we appropriate—colonise—the life of the Other and make their meanings our own and for our own purposes. To plagiarise is also to assume that we know the Other’s meanings; it is to evaluate and confer definitive meaning. So too does the reader colonise the fictional Other. However, in more recent fiction—specifically, postmodern literature—attempts are made to undermine such colonisation. As Thomas Docherty writes:

Postmodern narrative attacks the possibility of the reader herself or himself becoming a fully enlightened and imperialist subject with full epistemological control over the fiction and its endlessly different or altered characters.84

Postmodern characters cannot be pinned down by the reader and colonised as it were. Their identities are not fixed, nor are their essences, thus they escape being of value—a commodity—for the reader. This endeavour is certainly important for the “colonised”—the marginalised Other—but not necessarily for the “coloniser”—the shivering reader.

The question of ethics is of course a difficult one and this brief exegesis is far from exhaustive. However, the line of argument for the present thesis is that the reader is ultimately responsible for how he or she interpret and “use” literature. Just as the reader is ultimately responsible for carefully navigating through political, economic, and philosophical rhetoric, so too should the reader be responsible for navigating his or her

82 See Levinas’s Totality and Infinity.
83 Felski, Uses of Literature, 26–27.
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way through the rhetoric of the novel, especially the particular stories that are told. The reader should also be aware of the ethics of alterity and the hubris of assuming he or she can know the Other. However, for the shivering reader, the value of fiction is subject to his or her own anxious self-interest, freedom, and responsibility; and this self-interest necessitates that the shivering reader look to others—both real people and fictional characters—to better understand the meaning of his or her own life. More specifically, the shivering reader must look to fictional characters’ stories—stories which undoubtedly have rhetorical traces of the novelist, be they “beneficial" or “detrimental" to the reader. This rhetorical influence is especially evident in what events of the characters’ stories are represented, but also in how the characters’ stories are represented. More specifically, the novelist's influence is evidenced in how the meaningful projects of characters are represented, including their intended choices but also, and more importantly, the outcomes and revelations of these choices. Indeed, it is the representation of the outcomes of the characters’ personal narratives which are of the most value to the shivering reader as it is the outcomes which are responsible for awakening the sensibilities of the reader’s understanding of what a meaningful life is. And, as we will see in the following chapter, this awakening is no better achieved than in the often shocking representation of the fictional Other’s death-scenes and their explicit revelations of the meaning of life. How the reader responds to these revelations is the responsibility of the reader.

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84 Docherty, “The Ethics of Alterity,” 144–45.
The Explicit Revelations of the Dying

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The Explicit Revelations of the Dying

But have I now seen Death? Is this the way
I must return to native dust? O sight
Of terror, foul and ugly to behold,
Horrid to think, how horrible to feel!
—John Milton, Paradise Lost, xi, 462–65

What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.
—Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”

In the previous chapter we described the historical dead life of the Other as being a generous gift for the perplexed living. The death of the Other is an act of generosity insofar as the deceased “hand” themselves over to the living, to have the meaning of their dead lives interpreted and evaluated. From these evaluations, we derive understanding and insight into what meaning we will create for ourselves. However, when we interpret the dead life of the Other—the complete meaningful life of the dead Other—we are not necessarily looking to the Other to derive meaning, but looking at the Other as if they were purely an object for our “superior” gaze. But, a contradiction belies this action insofar as the “superior” gaze is that of the “inferior,” perplexed living: the living have no justification in evaluating the dead Other as it is an evaluation essentially founded on ignorance. Indeed, a far greater gift for the living is the more “passive” action of deriving the meaning of life by looking to the Other—by listening to and seeing the Other’s communication of their wisdom and insight. But, as Benjamin
The Explicit Revelations of the Dying suggests, we must not look to the living Other—the equally perplexed Other—but to the dying Other, as only the dying have the authority to convey to the perplexed their understanding of the meaning of life. Consider again Benjamin’s claim that “a man’s wisdom” and understanding of the meaning of life, the meaning of his real life,

first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end—unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it—suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him.¹

Only when we are dying, when death is upon us, do we “suddenly” attain the wisdom and the clarity of understanding of the meaning of life, specifically, the meaning of our own, individual life. For Benjamin, the act of dying is a moment of pure enlightenment; it reveals to us an insight into the meaning of our lives which transcends all previous knowledge, such that every action and project of our lives—which may have held no significance in our “lived” lives—suddenly becomes significant and meaningful. To use the language of literary criticism, if we are each creating our personal narratives, then the event of death is very much the denouement of the realist plot, where the final scene of the plot is “unknotted,” the mystery is solved, and the meaning of life revealed.² Again, this claim seems contrary to postmodernist theories of the decentered self, and that the notion of individual identity is a cultural myth. But what the transcendence of the death-scene seems to imply is that there is a final meaning—a final recognition of the meaning of a self that unifies “the many views [identities] of oneself.” This is to say that the claim that one is culturally created may indeed be possible, but there is still a sense of an overriding meaning—a “true” self. Despite the many varied meanings one creates or has created, one still becomes who one is to

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become. This is the foundation of the wisdom of the dying, to the innumerable selves of the living. Death brings closure to our projects and the story of our lives; and, with the story of our lives concluded, meaning is revealed. Of course, such a claim is also contrary to Sartre’s belief that the meaning of life is revealed after death—that the meaning is like an unresolved chord insofar as we project beyond our death:

If it is only chance which decides the character of our death and therefore of our life, then even the death which most resembles the end of a melody can not be waited for as such; luck by determining it for me removes from it any character as an harmonious end. An end of a melody in order to confer its meaning on the melody must emanate from the melody itself. A death like that of Sophocles will therefore resemble a resolved chord but will not be one, just as the group of letters formed by the falling of alphabet blocks will perhaps resemble a word but will not be one. Thus this perpetual appearance of chance at the heart of my projects can not be apprehended as my possibility but, on the contrary, as the nihilation of all my possibilities, a nihilation which itself is no longer a part of my possibilities.³

The idea that death will coincide with the end of my projects is a fallacy as one is always looking to the future—one is always projecting beyond an unforeseeable death. It is only by chance that death and the end of my project is will coincide. As Strauss describes:

This image of closure is only a fantasy of death and rarely corresponds to the events of my life or of my death as a whole life or a totalising death. Still, it does not really matter that it is a fantasy, since death never appears to me in its reality as my own.⁴

But what is implied by the death-scene, described by Benjamin, and realised in Don Quixote, Kurtz, and Kane, is the absence of projection. It is a recognition of death: that

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² See Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 227.
³ Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 557–58.
it is my death and no longer is it somebody else who is dying. It is no longer death that is elsewhere but life that is elsewhere. I no longer project my individual possibilities. In somewhat of a reversal of Heidegger’s description of how “everyone dies” and that death is always elsewhere, Maurice Blanchot describes death as a becoming “everyone” such that it is not that everyone else dies, but that one dies—one becomes one of the anonymous “they”:

When someone dies, “when” designates not a particular date but no matter what date. Likewise there is a level of this experience at which death reveals its nature by appearing no longer as the demise of a particular person, or as death in general, but in this neutral form: someone or other’s death. Death is always nondescript.5

We could interpret such comments as meaning that in death one has no possibility of “pushing death away” and no possibility of maintaining one’s distance by attributing death to everyone else who dies.6 By removing this distance, one can no longer maintain the possibility of an individualised projection. Instead, one has become everyone—one has become “other”; as such there is only a past, individual life, which is, in death, seen from the point of otherness. Death can therefore be understood as a conclusion and a revelation realised by the dying self who has become “other.” We may also say that in death one becomes a contradiction as one gains an “impartial,” objective understanding of one’s partial, subjective life. This objective “otherness” is not that of the living, but of the “enlightened” dying. And this, it may be argued, is why the wisdom of the dying is the greatest gift for the living, as it is imbibed with a sense of the sublime and the profound—the impartial otherness that the living cannot know until they too become the “they” in the phrase “they die.” But in order to receive this “gift” we must firstly witness the Other’s experience of death—witness the Other’s “death-scene”—what Anny, Roquentin’s former lover in Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nausea, describes as one of the “privileged situations” that one may experience in life:

5 Blanchot, The Space of Literature, 241.
“They were situations which had a very rare and precious quality, a style if you like. To be a king, for example, struck me as a privileged situation when I was eight years old. Or else to die. You may laugh, but there were so many people drawn at the moment of their death, and there were so many who uttered sublime words at that moment, that I honestly thought . . . well, I thought that when you started dying you were transported yourself. Besides, it was enough just to be in the room of a dying person: death being a privileged situation, something emanated from it and communicated itself to everybody who was present. A sort of grandeur. When my father died, they took me up to his room to see him for the last time. Going upstairs, I was very unhappy, but I was also as it were drunk with a sort of religious ecstasy; I was at last going to enter a privileged situation. I leaned against the wall, I tried to make the proper gestures. But my aunt and my mother were there, kneeling by the bed, and they spoiled everything with their sobs.”

Anny describes the privilege, the gift of experiencing the death of the Other, as a moment bound with sublimeness and importance. It connects the living with something transcendent, as if the revelation of meaning were an unearthly force. Indeed, Benjamin implies that the cause of this revelation is almost like a “non-conscious” force—that the images, memories, which are “set in motion inside a man” are not recalled intentionally, but are “inspired,” possibly externally (by a God or higher power), or possibly internally by some unconscious force within the mind or the soul. Here we see a possible insight into Benjamin’s self-declared “Janus face” which “compelled him to oscillate between metaphysical concerns and Marxist interests.” For Benjamin, the material and the immaterial conflict at the moment of death, in the form of the inexplicable phenomenon of the meaningful revelation.

Although somewhat fanciful or maybe romantic, Benjamin’s claims are neither unique nor recent. Indeed, Benjamin’s descriptions are very similar to innumerable accounts of people who have had near-death experiences—people “who have revived

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6 Haase and Large, Maurice Blanchot, 53.  
7 Sartre, Nausea, 210–11.  
8 Wolin, Walter Benjamin, xii.
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from apparent death as well as those who have only come close to death." These people often describe how their “life flashed before their eyes,” a phenomenon which is commonly referred to as a “life review,” or “panoramic memory.” Moreover, near-death experiences, and similar phenomena such as “out-of-body experiences” and “otherworld journeys,” are believed to be a universal phenomenon, spanning various religious and cultural backgrounds of both the Western and Eastern worlds.

More importantly, and especially for the shivering reader, descriptions of death-scenes, life reviews and meaningful revelations are also found throughout the history of great literature. Indeed, as Robert Weir describes in *Death in Literature*, death-scenes of characters are ubiquitous in not only the novel but all genres of literature, having appeared throughout the history of literature as far back as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from c.2300 BCE:

Much of the world's literature depicts death scenes of individuals. Sometimes the individuals are real persons in history; sometimes they are creations of an author’s imaginative mind. Sometimes the dying person is historically important; other times the person is historically unimportant or merely fictional. In any case . . . the depiction of an individual’s death is often the focal point or culminating event of a real-life story or of a poem, play, short story, or novel.

One of the most obvious forms where the death-scene is of particular importance is tragedy—a genre which, like existential philosophy, has as its theme the isolation and loneliness of man, facing a blind-fate in a silent world. As George Steiner writes: “The human condition is tragic. It is ontologically tragic, which is to say in essence. Fallen man is made an unwelcome guest of life or, at best, a threatened stranger on this

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9 Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, vi.
10 See Raymond Moody’s description of the “complete” experience of death, quoted in ibid., 102–103.
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hostile or indifferent earth.”\textsuperscript{14} The death of the tragic hero can be seen as both the culmination of tragedy but also the deliverance from tragic absurdity. However, death in tragedy is not so much concentrated on the death of an individual—the irreparable destruction of the hero—but the end of an action.\textsuperscript{15} We see this in Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet} where Hamlet’s life ends as does his endeavour to avenge his father’s death by killing his uncle:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Hamlet}  
O, I die, Horatio.

The potent poison quite o’ercrows my spirit.

I cannot live to hear the news from England,

But I do prophesy th’election lights

On Fortinbras. He has my dying voice.

So tell him, with th’occurents more and less

Which have solicited—the rest is silence. \textit{Dies.}

\textit{Horatio}  
Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,

And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Hamlet proclaims his own death, but his concerns are only for the state of Denmark. More importantly, in his death, Hamlet completes both the action of the play and the action of his life. Here we see what may be one of the rare occasions where one’s projects—simplified here into a singular action—coincide with one’s death.

A novelistic example of a death-scene—one more akin to Benjamin’s description—is Cervantes’s \textit{Don Quixote} (1605–15), and the description of Don Quixote’s death-scene. As the story goes, Don Quixote’s many outrageous and often disastrous adventures as a knight errant come to an end when he is seized by fever and subsequently bed-ridden. For six days Don Quixote alternates between very short periods of waking and long periods of sleeping, until on one of his last days on earth, he wakes, bellowing:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{14} Steiner, “‘Tragedy’, Reconsidered,” 2.
\textsuperscript{15} R. Williams, \textit{Modern Tragedy}, 54–56.
\end{quote}
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“Blessed be Almighty God, who has done me such good! Indeed his mercy knows no bounds, and the sins of men do not lessen or obstruct it.”

The niece paid careful attention to her uncle’s words, and they seemed more rational than usual, during his recent illness at least, and she asked him:

“What are you saying, sir? Has something happened? What’s this mercy you’re on about, and these sins of men?”

“The mercy, niece,” Don Quixote replied, “is that which God has this instant shown me, unobstructed, as I said, by my sins. My mind has been restored to me, and it is now clear and free, without those gloomy shadows of ignorance cast over me by my wretched, obsessive reading of those detestable books of chivalry. Now I can recognise their absurdity and their deceitfulness, and my only regret is that this discovery has come so late that it leaves me no time to make amends by reading other books that might be a light for my soul. It is my belief, niece, that I am at death’s door; I should like to make myself ready to die in such a way as to indicate that my life has not been so very wicked as to leave me with a reputation as a madman; for even though this is exactly what I have been, I’d rather not confirm this truth in the way in which I die.”

Don Quixote describes to his niece how he has had what can only be described as a “divine” revelation—a revelation shown to him by God. God reveals to Don Quixote his past life for what it really is; it is a revelation that is clear, sane, unobstructed, and truthful. From Benjamin’s perspective, we can interpret the restoration of Don Quixote’s sanity as the metaphorical revelation of “wisdom,” which is special to the dying: God’s mercy has restored the mind of Don Quixote who was mad and now is sane; but God has also metaphorically restored the “unaware” to the “aware,” the perplexed to the wise.

But, if Don Quixote’s death acts as a metaphor for the revelation of meaning in death, then a second example can be said to represent a more “materialist” revelation, more akin to Benjamin's description of the “non-conscious” revelation. This example is

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the death of Mr. Kurtz—the enigmatic agent for “the Company”—in Joseph Conrad’s 

Heart of Darkness. The seaman Marlow tells a story to his companions of the cruising ship the Nellie of an experience he once had some years ago in Africa, whilst they wait on the river Thames for the tide to turn. Marlow describes how he was given command of a steamboat to travel up the River Congo (unnamed in the novel) to transport people and goods for an ivory trading company. Throughout his journey, Marlow hears of a man—the first-class agent Kurtz—whom Marlow at first admires, but later fears and resents. The impudent Kurtz is ill and is to be relieved from his post at the Company’s Inner Station on the river, either by the company or by “natural causes.” Marlow is drawn to Kurtz and eventually meets him, only after first being attacked by natives—an attack ordered by Kurtz—in which a shipmate of his was killed. Marlow sees that Kurtz is by now most certainly dying and clearly insane, and describes how Kurtz’s life was “running swiftly . . . , ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time.” Kurtz’s death is imminent, and Marlow renders for the listeners of his story (his companions on the Nellie, and the reader) the last moments of Kurtz’s life:

“Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn’t touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision,—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath—

“The horror! The horror!”

Kurtz’s visions reveal to him the meaning of his life and his actions, and, with the clarity of the dying, he now understands the horror of his actions, which, until his last moments, he has vehemently justified. He is, as Benjamin would suggest, imbibed with

17 Cervantes, Don Quixote, 976–77.
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the authoritative wisdom of the dying. More importantly, he is imbied with authoritative wisdom for the living. Indeed, in his critical essay on *Heart of Darkness*, Jacques Berthoud argues that Kurtz’s revelation can be seen as a universal revelation:

The moment of death, it would seem, has a meaning that is relevant to all mankind. So that what the dying Kurtz perceives may not only be true of himself as an individual; it may also be significant for humanity at large.

We have to take the moment of death, then, as Marlow presents it: not as a cause of terror, but as a condition for insight. As far as Kurtz is concerned, it is the instant in which, for the first and last time, he sees his past for what it has truly been; it is the point at which, in a rending flash, his values at last connect with his life and reveal it to be a “darkness.”

Like Benjamin’s description of the wisdom of the dying, Berthoud’s interpretation of Kurtz’s revelation is one of new-found insight, a new awareness, but it is not only a revelation for Kurtz, the individual, but for all humanity—it is at once both universal and relational. Kurtz has the authoritative wisdom for not only the shivering reader, but for all the “living,” which he intentionally or unintentionally communicates. Indeed, in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now!* (1979)—the film which draws upon various themes of *Heart of Darkness*—the “universal” dying words of Kurtz “echo” as a voice-over, long after he has died, as if his words were haunting both Captain Willard and the viewer.

This example illustrates the profound significance of the moment of death and the revelation of meaning. And yet it is an experience that we cannot “know” and understand until we, ourselves, are dying—until we are each experiencing our own individual death. Indeed, it is Marlow who describes the experience from his understatedly limited point of view—a description which comes from outside of Kurtz’s subjective experience. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), an early work on the theory of

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19 Ibid., 111–12.
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the novel, E. M. Forster describes the “peculiar” event of our death as a “darkness”—an unknowable experience—and contrasts it with the experience of our birth. He describes them both as

strange because they are at the same time experiences and not experiences. We only know of them by report. We were all born, but we cannot remember what it was like. And death is coming even as birth has come, but, similarly, we do not know what it is like. Our final experience, like our first, is conjectural. We move between two darknesses.\(^{21}\)

The experience of the events of birth and death are knowable only by report: we have some understanding of them as an event in the lives of the Other (the experience of the birth of a child, or witnessing the passing of a relative) but our own individual birth (an event from our past) and our own individual death (an event which lies somewhere in our future) remain unknown to us (even if Tristram Shandy tells us his story based on this unknown). However, it is the event of death which is of more of concern to us, particularly in terms of how we live our lives in relation to death. Our birth, it can be argued, can be “reconciled” in our understanding: we are each of us born—we are each thrown into the world—which is a “fact” that we each must “accept.” And of the experience itself, we have witnesses to tell us. More importantly, with the exception of our facticity—the historical time and place that we are born, our race, colour, gender, our body, and social status\(^ {22}\)—the event of our birth does not overtly influence the remainder of our lives or the creation of meaning in our lives, particularly if we consider that we must create the meaning of our lives in terms of our facticity. Indeed, I cannot choose the meaningful project of becoming the first indigenous prime-minister of Australia if I am a non-indigenous Australian.

In contrast, the event of our death is still outstanding as a factual possibility of our future which, as Heidegger states, “is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational, and

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\(^{21}\) Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 57.

\(^{22}\) Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, 190.
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which is not to be outstripped. Indeed, as Heidegger further suggests, Dasein is necessarily a being-towards-death: our death has a necessary sense of imminence as from the moment we are born death is impending, or as Heidegger quotes: “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die.” As such, death plays a most important role in our personal narratives, and has a perpetual influence on our meaningful choices. And because we are beings-towards-death, because death is a possibility that remains outstanding and cannot be outstripped, we are anxious about the event of death itself and as to what meaning it may reveal, especially if, as Benjamin suggests, it reveals the definitive meaning of our lives. Thus, to stave off this anxiety, to warm our shivering lives, we must endeavour to gain some understanding and insight into the experience of death, and some understanding of its significance, before our own experience of death. For this understanding we look to the authoritative dying Other. As Benjamin claims, death gives the dying the authority of wisdom that the anxious living cannot know, until they too are dying. And it is the communication of this authoritative wisdom—the sublime words of the dying Other—which is sought by the living.

Indeed, we can see how the dying’s last utterances are of utmost importance to the living when we consider the intense hype that surrounds the final, dying words of Charles Foster Kane in Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane (1941). “Rosebud,” Kane’s infamous dying word—the utterance accentuated by an extreme close-up of his greying moustachioed mouth—sparks an international search by the “News Digest” newspaper to find the meaning of the enigmatic word and its relation to the equally enigmatic media tycoon. It is a search performed by, and for, the anxious living Other—the enigma of Kane’s words need to be “cracked” by the living. But, despite the News Digest’s reporters’ trite beliefs that “Rosebud” is possibly the name of “a racehorse he

23 Heidegger, Being and Time, 251H.
24 Ibid., 245H.
25 Interestingly, the assumption that “Rosebud” was overheard was recognised by Welles as a “plot hole.” Indeed, in the scene of Kane’s utterance of “Rosebud” there were no witnesses (except, of course, the viewer). However, as Ryan states, “the fact that Kane died alone, a comment on his life and character, has a symbolic rather than a causal function and it would be
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bet on once” or the name of a woman he loved, or (closer to the truth) “something he couldn’t get or something he lost,” the search is inevitably in vain as Kane’s childhood sleigh, bearing the inscription “Rosebud,” is incinerated, such that, with the exception of the privileged movie-goer, the meaning of the word “Rosebud,” and the meaning of Kane’s revelation, is forever lost.26

The significance of the death-scene of Citizen Kane and his final, dying word is that it gives viewers, the witnesses of his death, some understanding of the event of death and an insight into the revelation of the meaning of life. Indeed, if we also consider the example of Mr. Kurtz above, both Kane’s and Kurtz’s revelations and insights become our revelations and insights. But, what is even more significant is that the examples of the deaths of both Kane and Kurtz illustrate how only by sharing their experience can we construct our own understanding of death and the meaning of life. Only if the words of Kane and Kurtz are witnessed could they be of value to the living; only then could they warm the shivering reader. Indeed, it can be argued that Benjamin’s own particular descriptions of the experience of death—of how death “sets in motion” the images of one’s past life—must have come from either his own shared experiences of the Other’s death. Of course, just as possible is that this description is of Benjamin’s own invention, or, less “flattering,” is the possibility that Benjamin simply takes the experience of death as a cliché of what we are to expect in death. These possibilities notwithstanding, Benjamin’s, and innumerable other literal descriptions, representations, reported stories, and insights of the experience of the Other’s death, be they fictional or non-fictional, clichéd or not, are valuable to the anxious living as they add to their own wealth of understanding of the experience of death and the revelation of the meaning of life.

However, it can be argued that the novel’s representations—be it realist, modernist, or postmodernist—of the death of the Other are more valuable to the shivering reader than non-fictional representations, particularly if we again compare

easier to delete without damaging the logical integrity of the story.” Ryan, “Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Designs,” 67.
The Explicit Revelations of the Dying fiction to the non-fictional literary genres of auto/biography. What is more, the argument can also be made that the novel’s representations of the fictional Other’s death-scenes are even more valuable to the reader than the reader’s own physical interactions with the dying Other. This claim can be made for two reasons: the first relates to Benjamin’s claim that in the modern, industrial world, the reader no longer physically witnesses or experiences the death of the Other—the reader is no longer privy to privileged situations; therefore, the reader needs the death of the Other to be represented literally. This is to say that the novel is valuable, not because it can represent the death of the Other, but that it does represent it. The second reason for why the fictional Other can be considered more valuable than the literal communication of the real Other, specifically the biography, relates to the lack of restrictions placed on the novelist’s narrative technique in his or her representation of a character’s experience: the novelist is privileged with the freedom to narrate both the character’s subjective and objective experience of death—a freedom which is not bestowed on the biographer. We will examine these two reasons in turn.

1. The “Existence” of the Fictional Other’s Death

The “Publicness” of Death

Benjamin claims that since the beginning of the modern, nineteenth-century industrial world, our physical interactions with the dying Other have become less and less frequent. Death, Benjamin states, is no longer “omnipresent” to the public, and, therefore, it is no longer common to share or witness the experience of the Other’s death; it is no longer common to experience “privileged situations.” Benjamin contrasts this absence with the “publicness” of the pre-modern world, by claiming that, in the past,

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26 “Rosebud dead or alive,” Citizen Kane, directed by Orson Welles.

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dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one; think of the medieval pictures in which the deathbed has turned into a throne toward which the people press through the wide-open doors of the death house.\textsuperscript{27}

This pre-modern sense of publicness and community was epitomised by the concept of a “good death,” or “tame death,” so-called because of the dying individual’s self-awareness of the imminence of death. As Allen Kellehear describes, in \textit{A Social History of Dying}:

On feeling sure that one will die soon, one makes a will, dividing the estate fairly, makes some provision for poorer members of the family, accepts visits from the religious sections of the community, says one’s prayers and dies surrounded by family and friends.\textsuperscript{28}

Two examples, the first non-fictional, the second fictional, illustrate what it means to have a good death. The former comes from the 1707 memoirs of Duc de Saint-Simon and his account of the death of Mme de Montespan, a woman most renowned for having four bastard sons to King Louis XIV of France. Mme de Montespan had a continual fear of death and of dying alone, and went so far as to employ several women to watch her at night:

\begin{quote}
She slept with the bed-curtains drawn back and many lighted candles, her watchers round her, and whenever she woke she liked to find them talking, playing cards or eating, so that she could be sure that they were not becoming drowsy.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

However, at the age of sixty-seven, and despite being of good health, Mme de Montespan suddenly awoke one night feeling ill. Believing that she was dying,

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\textsuperscript{27} W. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 93.
\textsuperscript{28} Kellehear, \textit{A Social History of Dying}, 92.
\textsuperscript{29} Saint-Simon, “Madame de Montespan,” 133.
\end{flushright}
she made her confession and received the sacraments. All the servants were summoned, even the meanest of them, and she made public admission of her sins against the public, humbly asking forgiveness for the scandal which she had caused and for her ill-tempers, with such true-seeming repentance that nothing could have been more edifying. She then received the sacraments with ardent piety. The fear of death, that had so tormented her during her life, was suddenly dispelled and she ceased to be troubled.\footnote{Ibid., 135.}

She died shortly after, in her watchers and servants’ presence. What is significant about this example is that Mme de Montespan’s good death made it possible for her to share the experience of her death and her insights with those around her, most noticeably how her fear of death had, in death, disappeared—a warming insight, it would seem, for the living. Indeed, the value of Mme de Montespan’s experience of death is that it was directly or indirectly conveyed by a witness to Saint-Simon (whom it would appear was not present), who in turn conveyed the experience to the readers of his memoirs. Mme De Montespan’s death becomes the shared privilege of many.

The second example of the shared experience of a good death is that of Don Quixote, briefly described above. Following his divine revelation, Don Quixote asks his niece: “Call my good friends, my dear: the priest, the graduate Sansón Carrasco, and Master Nicolás the barber, because I want to confess my sins and make my will.”\footnote{Cervantes, \textit{Don Quixote}, 977.} Don Quixote proceeds to tell his friends and family that he clearly understands that he was mad and is now sane, and that he can now die, despite their entreaties that he should “live for a long time.” But Don Quixote, with the authority of the dying, denies any such possibility: he makes his will, receives the sacraments, and expresses his loathing of books of chivalry, before dying in a “calm and Christian manner.”\footnote{Ibid., 980.} What we also notice about this representation is that Don Quixote’s death is a clean, sanitised death—it is a death that can be easily “heard,” and revealed, unimpeded by the ravages of death—
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the death throes. It is articulate, intelligible, and transparent, making it a most valuable representation for the shivering reader.

These examples illustrate how a good death enabled the possibility of being witnessed such that they were essentially “public” deaths. However, some several centuries after the time of Cervantes and his knight errant, the modern, industrial world, was beginning to take shape and the good death of the Other became an event that was no longer commonly witnessed. Benjamin claims that this change occurred primarily because in the modern world “dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living.”

Benjamin adds that

in the course of nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realised a secondary effect which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of the dying. . . . Today, people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity, and when their end approaches they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs.

Benjamin’s claims can be said to allude to what is described as the experience of “social death,” where the dying Other’s lives are considered “complete,” not necessarily by themselves, but by society, as the dying cannot offer anything to society and can no longer take part in the “sociality” of existence. And, as a result of their exclusion from society, the dying are often denied a good death. As Kellehear describes:

Dying is increasingly becoming an out-of-sight and mistimed experience. . . . In the industrial world, if we can survive the early threats of accidents and suicides of youth, the mid-life cancer scares and heart attacks, most of us will end up with an assortment of diseases that will not provide us with a clear death-bed scene for ourselves or our families. Creeping arthritis, organ failure or dementia, and sudden body system failures

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34 Ibid.
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such as strokes, pneumonia or accidental falls will deny most of us a good death or even a well-managed one.

To make matters worse, between 17 and 30 per cent of the elderly (depending on who you read) will experience their dying in a nursing home.\(^{35}\)

Deaths such as these are commonly described as “bad” deaths or even “shameful” deaths as they are either hidden away from the public or come unexpectedly. Indeed, the private act of suicide was considered to be an especially bad death, as suicide was not only believed to be a sin, but is such that no confession of sin could be made.\(^{36}\) The significance of the modern phenomenon of the bad or shameful death is that if death is no longer omnipresent—deaths are no longer good deaths, witnessed by those persons at the bedside of the dying—then the meaning of life can no longer be revealed “publicly.” The Other’s deaths go unwitnessed—the dying die alone—and the living cannot draw upon the warmth of the dying Other’s wisdom. However, as Benjamin suggests, the novel, with its ubiquitous representations of the lives and deaths of the fictional Other, can offer the shivering reader the understanding and wisdom that he or she seeks. Fiction represents and shares the experience of death of its characters with its readers.

What is more, as has been described above, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*—a work that Benjamin suggests is “the earliest perfect specimen of the novel”\(^{37}\)—does represent the death-scene of its hero, prompting the possible assertion that *Don Quixote* somewhat initiates a convention of the death-scene as a fitting end to the story of the novel: where the earlier picaresque tales (to which *Don Quixote* owes its lineage) remained open and incomplete, insofar as the story could not finish because the author’s life has not finished, *Don Quixote* finds its end in a way in which our own deaths can be considered an end. *Don Quixote* as a great precursor of the novelistic genre establishes the death-scene as a befitting final event of the novel’s plot.

\(^{36}\) Ibid, 92.
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Yet, what must be noted is that not all novels—particularly those of the early, eighteenth-century realist novelists, which appeared more than a century after Don Quixote—are necessarily valuable to the shivering reader in their representation of death. Indeed, the decrease in omnipresence of death is reflected as a transitory period in the novel insofar as the early realist novelists did not focus on death as qualitatively as Cervantes or later novelists. A possible reason for this is that the death of the Other was not an experience that needed to be represented in any great detail by the early realist novelists. Indeed, in Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722), one of the first examples of the emerging genre, Moll Flanders—born and soon orphaned in London’s Newgate prison in the mid-seventeenth century—describes the death of those people (whom we would assume are closest to her) with mild indifference. She does not weep or lament their death, or, at least, she does not describe her lament or elaborate upon their death-scene. One telling example is the death of Robert, the first of her five husbands:

It concerns the Story in hand very little to enter into the farther particulars of the Family, or of myself, for the five Years that I liv’d with this Husband; only to observe that I had two Children by him, and that at the end of five Year he Died: He had been really a very good Husband to me, and we liv’d very agreeably together; But as he had not receiv’d much from them, and had in the little time he liv’d acquir’d no great Matters, so my Circumstances were not great, nor was I much mend’d by the Match.38

Moll’s indifference to her husband’s death can be seen as primarily symptomatic of her unwavering pursuit of money; however, it may also be seen as symptomatic of a historical period in which the experience of death was both ubiquitous and quantitative—death was commonplace, or, as Philippe Ariès states “as banal as seasonal holidays”39—and, as such, was not worthy of elaboration. Moreover, Moll Flanders tells her story from the year 1683, almost two decades after 1665, which was

38 Defoe, Moll Flanders, 102.
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the setting of Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* which was also written in 1722. Thus, Moll, at the age of almost seventy, the age at which she narrates her story, has “lived” through England’s Great Plague of 1665 and for her and, it may be suggested, her contemporary reader, death was a banal, commonplace event and did not need to be recounted in any depth.

However, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, death became more austere, more individual and subjective—death was now “my death”—and knowledge of unknowable death was sought; at the same time, however, the death of the Other became less public and hidden away, such that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century reader’s experience of the Other’s death, and the reader’s understanding of death, needed to be looked for elsewhere. The reader needed to look to the fictional representation of death, specifically, the *qualitative* representation of the fictional Other’s death, which, it can be argued, was respectively understood by the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists. Again we can say that the reader looked to fiction instead of non-fiction simply because of its *ubiquity*. Think of the deaths of such famous characters as Shelley’s Frankenstein, Dickens’s Magwitch, Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich and Anna Karenina, Conrad’s Mr. Kurtz and Nostromo, to name some of the more well-known examples, many of which will be further discussed in this thesis. These and many other qualitative examples of the deaths of the novel’s fictional Other are valuable to the shivering reader purely because they *exist* for the shivering reader and in a greater number than can be found in non-fictional works.

*The in/authentic reader and defamiliarisation*

However, despite the claim that in modern times the novel has increasingly provided a more qualitative representation of the death of the Other for the shivering reader, it does not necessarily imply that death is considered any less banal. Indeed, death may

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have become less ubiquitous in the public sphere, but there still remains what Heidegger describes as *Dasein’s inauthentic* attitude towards death. Heidegger claims that the basic mode of *Dasein’s* being is absorption in the inauthentic mode of everydayness in which we spend most of our lives. Macquarrie describes this everydayness as our absorption in the “daily round of tasks and duties, most of them performed in routine and habitual ways or according to a schedule. Everyday existence is practically oriented and concerned with the satisfaction of ordinary human needs.”

For Heidegger, this inauthentic everydayness also relates to our general attitude towards the event of death:

In the publicness with which we are with one another in our everyday manner, death is “known” as a mishap which is constantly occurring—as a “case of death.” Someone or other “dies,” be he neighbour or stranger. People who are no acquaintances of ours are “dying” daily and hourly. “Death” is encountered as a well-known event occurring within-the-world. As such it remains in the inconspicuousness characteristic of what is encountered in an everyday fashion. The “they” has already stowed away an interpretation for this event. It talks of it in a “fugitive” manner, either expressly or else in a way which is mostly inhibited, as if to say, “One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us.”

We exist with the knowledge that death is an everyday event, routine and habitual, and will unavoidably be an event in our lives. Yet, right now, it is of no concern to us, as we are absorbed in our inauthentic mode. Indeed, the inauthenticity of our everyday mode and absorption in the “they” has, as Heidegger puts it, a “tranquilising” effect, such that our everydayness is almost a “soothing” disposition, of flight and avoidance. As the narrator of Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, states: “To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face

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41 Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, 83.
42 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 252–53H.
43 Ibid., 253H.
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dying alone.” The crowd, the “they,” is “safe” as death is shared, whereas to face
death alone—the possibility of death—is to authentically acknowledge the
individualising effect that death has on each of us, and to allow fear and anxiety to
permeate our existence.

Heidegger’s description of our inauthentic treatment of death as an everyday
event appears to draw parallels to the description above of the pre-modern world’s
attitude that death is a banal and commonplace event. Indeed, death is an event which
occurs “daily and hourly” in both pre-modern and modern times; however, the
difference between the two periods can be located in the quantitative experience of the
Other’s death: in the pre-modern world the “real” experience of death can be described
as both quantitative and qualitative, whereas, in the modern world, the experience of
the Other’s death is still quantitative, but is no longer qualitative. The significance of
this disparity is that without the qualitative experience of the Other’s death, Dasein is
not roused from its inauthentic absorption in the “they,” and does not acknowledge the
finitude of its own life—that its individual death is impending and necessarily limits its
meaningful projects. Only when Dasein is wrenched from the “they,” and comes to
understand the finitude of its own existence, can it see its life as having the possibility
of becoming whole and meaningful. This is very similar to Nietzsche’s claims that we
do not distance ourselves from what is closest at hand—the foreground, or the
inauthentic everydayness of our lives—and see the larger picture that is the meaning of
the whole of our individual lives. What is needed by the reader—who is “proximally and
for the most part” inauthentically existing in the middle of his or her own personal
narrative—is the qualitative representation of the death of the fictional Other which can
rouse the reader from his or her inauthenticity and the “covering-up” of the finitude of
their lives—that death is impending. Thereby, the fictional elaboration of the death-
scene separates itself from the banal, everydayness of the death of the real Other.
Heidegger himself discusses the role of the work of art and poetry in disclosing truth, or

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the essence of being, what the Greeks called *aletheia*—the “unconcealedness” of being. The art work, Heidegger argues, is “not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing’s general essence.”46 We might say that the “essence” of death is not a banal, everyday event, but an event that is impending for me and it is my death, and it is the fictional representation of a character’s death-scene that unconceals this essence. Although Heidegger argues that poetry is the genre *par excellence* of authentic revelation, it can be argued that the novel form—be it realist, modernist, or postmodernist—does have the potential for unconcealing the finitude of the reader’s life, thereby rousing the inauthentic reader from the everydayness of life.

This description of art’s disclosure or unconcealment of death, and, more importantly, the fluctuation of the in/authenticity of the reader can also be identified as similar to that of the reading process itself. The inauthentic reader is in a continual flux between inauthenticity and authenticity when in the act of reading: the reader is “inauthentically” absorbed in the stories of the fictional Other, which is to say that the reader is engrossed with the characters of the novel and his or her desire to know what is to come next, what is “in-store” for the characters, such that the “real” world falls away into the background. Nathalie Sarraute argues that this engagement of the reader is one of the foremost tasks of the novelist: the novelist must “dispossess the reader and entice him, at all costs, into the author’s territory.”47 The reader must not be allowed to create characters or character types—creations which are drawn from the reader’s own life and from his or her own experience of other character types. The novelist must draw the reader in and keep the reader alert such that he or she does not create—only then does the vision of the author become the reader’s own.48 In this way the reader is truly inauthentic in his or her reading—there is no self-reflection or the possibility of the reader being dragged back into his or her own world.49 Sarraute’s

48 Ibid., 67–72.
49 We should note that metafictional novels such as Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* attempt to undermine the possibility of the reader being wholly and
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reader reads in bad faith; however, this does not make fiction valuable to the shivering reader: from this pure inauthentic, dispossession, the reader must be made to authentically reflect on his or her own life by being drawn back into his or her own life. This is very much a claim similar to that of Stanley Fish in “Literature in the Reader,” where he argues that reading is very much an “event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader.” It is this event, this happening, that is the meaning of the text. This claim is somewhat contrary to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s concept of the “Affective Fallacy,” where there is “a confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does). . . . The outcome . . . is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgement, tends to disappear.” For the present argument, however, the critical judgement of a text, if we understand reading as an event, is that it affects the reader by rousing him or her from their inauthentic engagement with the text.

It is here that three of Felski’s uses of literature—enchantment, shock, and recognition—come together almost as a sequence or process of reading “events”: “enchantment” (inauthenticity) is destroyed by “shock,” (the death-scene) which

inauthentically immersed in the text. Consider the continual disruption of the reading process in Tristram Shandy where Tristram, the overt, meddlesome narrator, consistently intrudes on the telling of his story with his descriptions of what are essentially meaningless and unnecessary events, anecdotes and digressions. The consequence of these interruptions is that the reader is continually “summoned” from an inauthentic immersion in the novel. The reader is constantly reminded that they are only reading “about” reality—reading a representation of reality which in Tristram Shandy is also an “unexperienced” reality. The loss of the self in the reading process becomes impossible and any identification of the reader with the character is compromised. Similarly, in Midnight’s Children, the fictional author Saleem Sinai is interrupted by his wife Padma and her intermittent interruptions. As such, readers of Midnight’s Children are consistently reminded that they are reading a text, thereby disrupting the “flow” of reading, and also their ability to immerse themselves in the “reality” of the text. Of course, Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children is a special example because it is a parody or, better, a pastiche of the style of Sterne’s Tristram Shandy—in other words, a postmodern pastiche on Sterne’s proto-postmodern novel. The postmodern pastiche unsettles the reader in a way that the realist novelist does not: it draws attention to itself as an artefact, and, in doing so, also draws the attention of the reader to its fictiveness which again disrupts the reader’s immersion in the text.


Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Affective Fallacy,” as quoted in ibid, 23.

A more extensive argument for reception as a criterion for the “quality” and value of a literary work is made by German literary historian and theorist Hans Robert Jauss: “For the quality and rank of a literary work result neither from the biographical or historical conditions of its origin, nor from its place in the sequence of the development of a genre alone, but rather from the criteria of influence, reception, and posthumous fame, criteria that are more difficult to grasp.” Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, 5.
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prompts “recognition” (authenticity). This idea of reflection as a result of being shocked
is a very important aspect of art and for the reader:

As long as we find ourselves prone to evasion, euphemism, and denial, as long as we
flinch away from reminders of our material and mortal existence as fragile composites of
blood, bone, and tissue, shock will continue to find a place in art. 53

Felski suggests that shock is the “antithesis of the blissful enfolding and voluptuous
pleasure that we associate with enchantment.” 54 But it can be argued that enchantment
and shock represent the oscillating process of reading; moreover, they are very much
interdependent. One must firstly be enchanted before shock can have its greatest
effect. And after the reader is shocked, comes the experience of recognition:

[Recognition is] at once utterly mundane yet singularly mysterious. While turning a page I
am arrested by a compelling description, a constellation of events, a conversation
between characters, an interior monologue. Suddenly and without warning, a flash of
connection leaps across the gap between text and reader; an affinity or an attunement is
brought to light. I may be looking for such a moment, or I may stumble on it haphazardly,
startled by the prescience of a certain combination of words. In either case, I feel myself
addressed, summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing traces of myself in the
pages I am reading. Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted; I
see something that I did not see before. 55

Recognition in this sense is a simplistic form of recognising oneself. This is especially
the case when the reader reads the qualitative description of a character’s death, he or
she may be “roused” from their inauthentic mode of reading and the everydayness of
the world in which he or she has become absorbed, uncovering their authentic attitude
towards their real existence, their meaningful projects, and the finitude of their lives. Of

53 Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 130.
54 Ibid., 113.
55 Ibid., 23.
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course, this rousing of the reader from inauthenticity may even be as simple as Jack Gladney’s interspersing of *White Noise*, with the question: “Who will die first?” For Jack, the question of death is not that it will and must happen, but of when it will happen, and to whom: himself, or his wife, Babette.

And yet, if the death-scene were to be considered as a convention of the novel, it would most certainly lose its impact on the reader (lose its capability of rousing the reader from his or her inauthenticity) if it were not for the ability of the novelist to both *individualise* the death of the fictional Other—so as to illustrate the uniqueness of their individual death and the subsequent individuality of the fictional Other’s meaning—but also to *estrange* and *defamiliarise* the death-scene so as to bring it into a closer, more intimate and profound light; in short, to affect. This is the central argument in Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky when he states that our perception in life, and the sensation of life, continually becomes automatic and habitual; the purpose of art is to make objects unfamiliar—to make the stone *stony*. It can be argued that the representation of death is in many ways already unfamiliar to the modern reader because it is no longer omnipresent; however, as death-scenes “accumulate” in literature—as the convention of the death-scene gains strength—then its impact must inevitably become lessened. Indeed, even similar, conventional revelations of meaning may come to the fore, such that the meaning of a character’s life is no longer individualised or individually meaningful. The character’s death and the meaning of the character’s life are absorbed into the mass of all other characters’ deaths and meanings. It is, therefore, the task of the novelist to individualise his or her character’s death—defamiliarise the character’s death from previous representations, such that the character stands above the rest, not in terms of the supposed meaningfulness of the character’s life, but as an individually meaningful life. The critical skill of the novelist is the ability to rouse the reader from the mode of inauthenticity—rouse the reader from his or her attitude of banality towards death—such that the reader examines his or her

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57 Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 17–18.
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individual life and its projected meaning, and, where possible, make new choices, and undertake new meaningful projects. Felski also suggests that the argument, made by the Russian Formalists, oversimplifies and underestimates the impact of literary works by yoking them too emphatically to a single moment. Art, in this view, can only surprise us for an instant, is subsequently eviscerated of all power to change consciousness and provoke thought, is rendered flat, stale, and humdrum by the passing of time.58

Here we can agree with Felski in the sense that art should shock and defamiliarise, but it can and should do so beyond its historical moment, and not simply as a formal feature of the text. Indeed, the accumulation of death-scenes should shock and continue to shock the reader, not merely for an instant, but upon rereading and re-presentation.

2. Omniscient Narration of the Fictional Other’s Death-scene

From the above description, it can be argued that the novel’s representation of the death-scenes of the fictional Other are of value to the shivering reader simply because they quantitatively and qualitatively represent the event of the fictional Other’s death—an event which is not commonly experienced in modern times. It can also be argued that the novel’s representation is more valuable than non-fictional, auto/biographical representations of the death of the Other purely because of the novel’s ubiquity. However, the novel can also be considered more valuable than non-fictional representations of the death of the real Other because of how the fictional Other’s
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experience of death can be represented. Such a claim can be made because the novelist has the freedom to transcend the limited possibilities of the auto/biographer. Indeed, despite the autobiographer’s distinct advantage of being able to write with an explicit, subjective, and authoritative voice, the autobiography can be considered the least valuable literary form to the reader because the autobiographer, like the reader, cannot write his or her own death or their dying revelations. The autobiography must end before the autobiographer’s death because death necessarily removes one’s “literary” voice. Consider again the character of Ginés de Pasamonte, from Don Quixote: Ginés de Pasamonte cannot finish his book until he himself is “finished.” But to finish one’s story in this way is, of course, an impossibility—one cannot write after the fact. Consider also the fictional preface to Defoe’s Moll Flanders: the autobiographical story is narrated by Moll Flanders, but the complete account of her life, and the claim that she “died a penitent”—which is stated only on the original title page—was “published” after her death. As the unnamed author of the preface describes:

We cannot say, indeed, that this History is carried on quite to the End of the Life of this famous Moll Flanders, as she calls her self, for no Body can write their own Life to the full End of it, unless they can write it after they are dead; but her Husband’s Life being written by a third Hand, gives a full Account of them both.59

What this description suggests is that the autobiographical representation of the Other’s personal narrative—be it fictional or non-fictional—must remain incomplete. Indeed, the autobiography proper is distinguished from other autobiographical forms, such as diaries and memoirs, because it is written retrospectively, or subsequent to the autobiographer’s experiences. The autobiography proper is a reconstruction of past memories, or, better, a reconsideration of the autobiographer’s life. The event of death, however, cannot be reconstructed by the autobiographer. Of course, some attempts

58 Felski, Uses of Literature, 115.
The Explicit Revelations of the Dying have been made to overcome this problem; however, these autobiographers generally write about what they predict the date of their death will be, but do not write of the actual experience. Moreover, many autobiographies are written well before the autobiographer’s death. Consider the example of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* (397–400CE) which he completed at the age of forty-six, some thirty years before his death in 430CE. A more contemporary example is Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nobel prize-winning autobiography, *Words*, which he began in 1960 and was published three years later, some seventeen years before his death on April 15, 1980. Moreover, Sartre’s autobiography predominantly focuses on his childhood, not his more prolific and well-known later life. These “incomplete” autobiographies lose much of their value for the shivering reader because they represent the experiences and events of individuals who, like the reader, have not yet completed their lives and have not experienced the end of their personal narratives, and, as such, like the reader, do not have the “authority” to convey the insights from these experiences. As Benjamin suggests, only the imminently dying have the authority to convey their insights.

In contrast, the biography can be considered more valuable to the shivering reader than the autobiography as the biographer can include the subject’s death. Indeed, as A. O. J. Cockshut describes, biography often does focus on the death-scene of the subject as it “hurries rapidly over the first fifteen, twenty or twenty-five years of life, concentrates on the active middle years, sketches old age, and then gives a special emphasis to death.” Cockshut further suggests that biographers who necessarily survive their subjects can and often do write of their subjects’ deaths from their own observation or more commonly by collecting witnesses’ accounts of their subjects’ deaths.

However, the question that must be asked is can a biographer objectively, and without “poetic license,” translate the moment—the experience—of the subject’s
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dead? More specifically, can the biographer accurately and completely represent the
subject’s revelation of meaning as he or she passes from life into death? The answer, it
would seem, is a resounding “no”: it is an impossible task for an objective observer to
represent the subject’s pure, “subjective” point of view. Indeed, not only the “neutral”
biographer, but the “creative” biographer can only exhaust themselves in any
endeavour to represent the subject’s experience of death. Thus, despite its “factuality,”
or creativity, the biography is an inferior, mediated reconstruction of the subject’s
experience of death. This description does well to illuminate one aspect of Virginia
Woolf’s discussion on the disparity between fiction and biography in “The Art of
Biography.” Woolf states:

The novelist is free; the biographer is tied.

. . . Here is a distinction between biography and fiction—a proof that they differ in the
very stuff of which they are made. One is made with the help of friends, of facts; the other
is created without any restrictions save those that the artist, for reasons that seem good
to him, chooses to obey.63

Biographers must predominantly limit their representation of the real Other to objective
facts, regardless of aesthetics or form, and must avoid adopting the subjective or
autobiographical point of view of their subject; in contrast, novelists are not restricted
by facts, aesthetics or form, nor are they restricted to a particular point of view. As W.
J. Harvey claims, the novelist has “god-like” power, such that the novelist has absolute
freedom to represent and articulate the “complete” intrinsic mental experience of a
character’s life, but also, and more importantly, the complete experience of a
character’s death64—a freedom that is beyond even the most elusive boundaries of the
biographer, and which is all to the benefit of the reader. In Harvey’s words again:

64 Harvey, Character and the Novel, 32.
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However invisible he may make himself, whatever narrative techniques he may use to conceal his exit from his fiction, the novelist is and must be both omnipotent and omniscient. The last word is, both literally and metaphorically, his alone.

This being so, the novelist may confer on us his god-like power and privilege; we, too, can see the fictional character in his private self, secret, entirely solitary. Life allows only intrinsic knowledge of self, contextual knowledge of others; fiction allows both intrinsic and contextual knowledge of others.65

Harvey suggests that the novelist can communicate to the shivering reader the complete objective and subjective experience of a character’s personal narrative, including his or her ordinarily uncommunicable death. Moreover, the omniscient narrator can reveal what the dying Other may intentionally or unintentionally conceal, and all at a distance—without proximity to the dying and without the need to witness their death. This possibility is essentially absent from earlier literary forms, most notably the death-scenes of tragedy. The spectator observes from a distance, outside of the action, such that the ironic mode is limited. As such, we may hear Hamlet’s death speech but we cannot absolutely know Hamlet’s thoughts as he dies.

Two examples of fictional characters’ death-scenes, both of which come from Leo Tolstoy, illustrate how omniscient narration is of the utmost value to the reader. The first is the death-scene of Ivan Ilyich in The Death of Ivan Ilyich (1886); the second is that of Anna from Anna Karenina (1877).

Ivan Ilyich

Tolstoy’s short story The Death of Ivan Ilyich is an invaluable example of a work that gives the reader access to the subjective experience of death and the revelations of the dying, but also because it broaches some of the existential themes mentioned above,
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such as our in/authentic attitude towards death and the concept of social death. The story is narrated in the third-person and begins after the death of Ivan Ilyich—a very successful judge in Petersburg. Ivan’s death is announced in a newspaper which is the first time that his friends had heard of his death. What is striking is that his so-called friends are unmoved by his death, and, as we are told:

On hearing of Ivan Ilyich’s death the first thought of each of those present was its possible effect in the way of transfer or promotion for themselves or their associates.

“I am sure to get Shtabel’s place, or Vinnikov’s, now,” thought Fiodr Vassilyevich. “I was promised that long ago, and the promotion means another eight hundred roubles a year for me, as well as the allowance for office expenses.”

“I must apply for my brother-in-law’s transfer from Kaluga,” thought Piotr Ivanovich. “My wife will be very pleased. She won’t be able to say then that I never do anything for her relations.”

Upon hearing of Ivan’s death, all thoughts turn to business and to the process of living. Indeed, his friends are disgruntled at now having to “fulfil the exceedingly tiresome demands of propriety by attending the requiem service and paying a visit of condolence to the widow.” Nor do his friends believe that Ivan’s death constitutes “sufficient grounds for interrupting the recognised order of things,” namely the game of whist planned for that evening. Ivan’s friends consider his death as a mishap and an inconvenience. Indeed, on hearing of Ivan’s death, one of his friends replies incredulously: “No. Really?” There is a sense of disbelief that we can actually die. As the narrator (clearly Tolstoy) describes:

Besides the reflections upon the transfers and possible changes in the department likely to result from Ivan Ilyich’s decease, the mere fact of the death of an intimate associate

65 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 102.
68 Ibid., 104.
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aroused, as is usual, in all who heard of it a complacent feeling that “it is he who is dead, and not I.”

“Now he had to go and die but I manage things better—I am alive,” each of them thought or felt.\(^{69}\)

Later, at Ivan’s requiem service, Piotr Ivanovich winks at his colleague Schwartz as if to imply: “Ivan Ilyich has made a mess of things—not like you and me.”\(^{70}\) Ivan’s friends have the common inauthentic attitude that death indeed happens, but right now, as Heidegger writes, it is of no concern to them. Indeed, Heidegger himself comments on the story of Ivan Ilyich, stating that to Ivan’s friends his death—and the dying of Others—is seen as a “social inconvenience, if not even a downright tactlessness.”\(^{71}\) Further, their attitude is almost one of immortality, as if Ivan did something wrong, erred in some way, “made a mess of things,” thereby giving death an opportunity to occur.

From these initial rhetorical “evaluations” of Ivan’s friends, we can discern that Ivan’s life is not highly regarded or valued by the Other: his was a meaningless life, passed over with ease. What is more, like Ivan’s friends, we, the readers, are also somewhat inauthentic in our attitude towards the event of death insofar as Ivan’s death and his meaning, at this early stage of the story, is that of merely one, meaningless face in a crowd. He is truly Other: Ivan is not yet individualised nor is his life individually meaningful. However, the remainder of the story does well to “wrench” both Ivan from the Other, and readers from our inauthentic attitude towards death by rendering, in greater detail, Ivan’s particular, individual and meaningful death. This is achieved by how Ivan’s death is represented, as Tolstoy depicts Ivan’s subjective, and somewhat absolute, experience of death and the revelation of his life’s meaning—a revelation which is not unlike that described by Benjamin. This representation begins by recounting several significant moments in Ivan’s life, including those of his childhood, and of his later life such as when he first became a lawyer, when he married, and when

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\(^{69}\) Ibid., 102.

\(^{70}\) Ibid., 103.

\(^{71}\) See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 254H and 254H n xii.
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he was given his various promotions. But it is the period of his fatal illness which provides the main content of the discourse of the story. Ivan’s life takes a significant turn when he begins to have an unknown abdominal problem—either a floating liver or appendicitis—brought on by a seemingly innocuous knock to his side. Despite the opinions of many doctors who continue to tell Ivan that his pain is nothing to concern himself about, it is clear that Ivan’s health is deteriorating. Indeed, it seems only Ivan’s wife’s brother speaks the truth of Ivan’s situation, stating plainly to his sister that Ivan is “a dead man! Look at his eyes—there’s no light in them.” But Ivan’s wife, Praskovya Fiodorovna, claims that her brother is exaggerating: she, like Ivan’s friends, does not believe that death can happen to Ivan. All deny that such a thing as death is looming. And they deny that Ivan is dying by avoiding the sight of him, avoiding his death-bed, such that their attitude towards him is essentially that he is socially dead. Only Ivan concedes that he is physically dying—that death is looming; and yet, like his friends and his wife, he cannot grasp the idea of dying. What is more, Ivan desires a feeling of inauthenticity towards his death: he seeks relief from the fact that death is coming, going so far as to set up “mental screens” to avoid authentic thoughts of death.

Another fortnight passes, Ivan’s illness worsens and he begins to “reflect how steadily he was going downhill, for every possibility of hope to be shattered.” He feels a sense of isolation, loneliness, as he is indeed alone in his dying. No-one, except Gerasim, his butler, sympathises. In his loneliness, Ivan dwells only on the memories of the past:

One after another pictures of his past presented themselves to him. They always began with what was nearest in time and then went back to what was most remote—to his childhood—and rested there. . . . “But I mustn’t think of all that . . . it’s too painful,” and Ivan Ilyich brought himself back to the present.

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72 Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 133.
73 Ibid., 154.
74 Ibid., 155.
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Ivan considers the chain of memories that stretch back to his childhood, only to find that another series of memories comes to mind—of how his illness has steadily developed and grown worse: “This time, too, the farther he looked back the more life there had been. There had been more of what was good in life and more of life itself.”

Ivan sees that his life from the beginning of his childhood to just after becoming a lawyer was happiest. This is significant if we consider that having become a lawyer, Ivan was faced with the challenge of replacing his own values with those of people of high standing:

As a law student he had done things which had before that seemed to him vile and at the time had made him feel disgusted with himself; but later on when he saw that such conduct was practised by people of high standing and not considered wrong by them, he came not exactly to regard those actions of his as all right but simply to forget them entirely or not be at all troubled by their recollection.

Ivan sees that life before his becoming a lawyer was meaningful and authentic, whereas his life as a lawyer and judge was founded on his succumbing to the “they,” such that his life was no longer his own, but meaningless and inauthentic. Indeed, Ivan, by his own admission realises that:

those scarcely detected inclinations of his to fight against what the most highly placed people regarded as good, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing and all the rest false. And his professional duties, and his ordering of his life, and his family, and all his social and official interests might all have been false.
Ivan’s revelation is that the appearance of meaningfulness is sometimes exactly this, only an appearance, and only in death is the reality of what is essentially the meaninglessness of his life uncovered.

But Ivan continues to defend his past life, and will not accept the conclusion he has drawn. Only when another two weeks have passed, at one hour before his death, is this earlier revelation affirmed; only then does he see the definitive meaning of his past life, as it is revealed to him in death:

Ivan Ilyich had fallen through the hole and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that his life had not been what it ought to have been but that it was still possible to put it right. He asked himself: “But what is the right thing?” and grew still, listening. Then he felt that someone was kissing his hand. He opened his eyes and looked at his son. He felt sorry for him. His wife came up to him. He looked at her. She was gazing at him with open mouth, the tears wet on her nose and cheeks, and an expression of despair on her face. He felt sorry for her.

“Yes, I am misery to them,” he thought. “They are sorry but it will be better for them when I die.” He wanted to say this but had not strength to speak. “Besides, why speak, I must act,” he thought. With a look he indicated his son to his wife and said:

“Take him away . . . sorry for him . . . sorry for you too . . .” He tried to add “Forgive me” but said “Forego” and, too weak to correct himself, waved his hand, knowing that whoever was concerned would understand.

And all at once it became clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not go away was suddenly dropping away on one side, on two sides, on ten sides, on all sides. He felt full of pity for them, he must do something to make it less painful for them: release them and release himself from this suffering. “How right and how simple,” he thought. “And the pain?” he asked himself. “What has become of it? Where are you pain?”

He began to watch for it

“Yes, here it is. Well, what of it? Let the pain be.

“And death? Where is it?”
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He searched for his former habitual fear of death and did not find it. “Where is it? What death?” There was no fear because there was no death either.

In place of death there was light.

“So that’s what it is!” he suddenly exclaimed aloud. “What joy!”

To him all this happened in a single instant, and the meaning of that instant suffered no change thereafter. For those present his agony lasted another two hours. There was a rattle in his throat, a twitching of his wasted body. Then the gasping and the rattle came at longer and longer intervals.

“It is all over!” said someone near him.

He caught the words and repeated them in his soul. “Death is over,” he said to himself. “It is no more.”

He drew in a breath, stopped in the midst of a sigh, stretched out and died.\textsuperscript{78}

To those people around him, Ivan’s death is an unpleasant, visceral experience of sound and movement, yet for Ivan it is peaceful, and a moment of enlightenment, in which time “stands still.” Indeed, his “catching sight of the light” possibly symbolises the presence of God, immortality, paradise, but also symbolises inner enlightenment, truth, revelation, and wisdom. Light also symbolises the uncovering of “reality,” one of the central themes of Plato’s simile of the cave, described in \textit{The Republic} (ca. 375 BCE), in which the prisoners in a cave see only the shadows of reality, such that all is illusion and darkness. Only when the prisoners break free of their shackles and turn around do they see \textit{reality}, firstly by looking to the fire responsible for casting the shadows of reality, and then by venturing out beyond the fire, towards the sunlight outside of the cave, to the intelligible region of truth, intelligence, and the good.\textsuperscript{79} In the same way, Tolstoy suggests that only when we die do we see the light that is the reality of our lives, and see the true meaning of our lives. Of course, Tolstoy’s symbolic representation of death does not belong to “real” experience. Moreover, the intimate details of Ivan’s revelation could not have been communicated or understood in real

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 160–161.
\textsuperscript{79} Plato, \textit{Republic}, bk. 7, sec. 7.
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life. Only as an omniscient narrator can Tolstoy communicate the details of Ivan’s “falling through the hole,” and “catching sight of the light.” These descriptions, and others from the passage, represent that which was not communicated by Ivan to the witnesses of his death. Indeed, in his final moments, Ivan wants only to relieve his wife and child of the torment of his existence and have them forgive him for the past he has only now, in death, understood; yet he is unable to convey these thoughts into words—he does not have the strength to speak—such that he must endeavour to explain his thoughts through his gestures, which can only be described as a poor representation of what he actually wishes to communicate. The “omniscient reader,” however, has the privilege to experience what Ivan experiences in death, and understand Ivan’s revelatory insights as he passes. For the reader, Ivan’s experience is clear and concise and communicable. And he conveys to the reader a valuable warning: his final words, gestures, and looks tell the reader that the way he has lived his life was not the way he should have. Ivan tells the reader how not to live his or her own life—how not to have a meaningless life or an unwanted, dissatisfying revelatory meaning. It is a warning, and, as has been described above, an authentic uncovering. As Henri Troyat describes in his biography on Tolstoy: “We think of ourselves while Ivan Ilyich moans in pain in his bed; we pass our own lives in review as he draws up the balance sheet for his.”

Ivan’s revelations cause our own re-evaluations. Because of this detailed account of Ivan’s death, the reader is forced to authentically reflect on his or her own life—something that Ivan’s friends—who do not have the privilege of knowing this story—avoid.

Anna Karenina

80 Troyat, Tolstoy, 640.
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Through the technique of third-person narration, Tolstoy communicates the uncommunicable and reveals what is essentially the concealed, subjective experience of Ivan Ilyich’s death. However, the omniscience of a third-person narrator is also valuable if we again consider Benjamin’s claim that the value of the death of the dying Other is only so if they share the revelation of meaning with those witnessing their death. Of course, not all deaths are good deaths and not all deaths are public or have the possibility of being witnessed. More importantly, the unwitnessed death is of no value to the living, as the insights and wisdom of the dying cannot be shared. Only if the dying Other experiences a “good death,” or the like, is it possible that their thoughts and insights can be communicated. However, in fiction, the omniscient narrator can assume the role of the “god-witness” to the solitary death or the shameful death—the death where there is no, or can be no, “human” witness. This is evidenced by our second example from Tolstoy: the suicide of Anna in *Anna Karenina*. Anna, is a well-established woman of high Petersburg society, and is married to her much older husband, Alexei Karenin—an official in the Imperial administration. Her life and marriage have the appearance of happiness: she attends all her formal societal functions with elegance and decorum, and is the object of envy for many. However, after a chance meeting with Count Vronsky she begins to question the meaningfulness of her marriage to Karenin. Vronsky pursues Anna and despite Anna’s initial resistance they begin an affair. However, although Anna at first feels that her life with Vronsky is both happy and meaningful, she increasingly becomes disillusioned about her affair and questions the faithfulness of Vronsky, which begins a steady, tragic downfall for Anna, as she becomes depressed and suicidal. Anna chooses to take her own life, to martyr herself, as revenge primarily against Vronsky. It is an act that she undertakes alone, and her death is essentially unwitnessed. She chooses her mode of death—to throw herself between the carriages of a moving train, which, as she ominously learns from an earlier incident in the novel, is “easiest,” and “instantaneous.”

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“There!” she said to herself, staring into the shadow of the carriage at the sand mixed with coal poured between the sleepers, “there, right in the middle, and I’ll punish [Vronsky] and be rid of everybody and of myself.”

She wanted to fall under the first carriage, the midpoint of which had drawn even with her. But the red bag, which she started taking off her arm, delayed her, and it was too late: the midpoint went by. She had to wait for the next carriage. A feeling seized her, similar to what she experienced when preparing to go into the water for a swim, and she crossed herself. The habitual gesture of making the sign of the cross called up in her soul a whole series of memories from childhood and girlhood, and suddenly the darkness that covered everything for her broke and life rose up before momentarily with all its bright past joys. Yet she did not take her eyes from the wheels of the approaching second carriage. And just at that moment when the midpoint between the two wheels came even with her, she threw the red bag aside and, drawing her head down between her shoulders, fell on her hands under the carriage, and with a light movement, as if preparing to get up again at once, sank to her knees. And in that same instant she was horrified at what she was doing. “Where am I? What am I doing? Why?” She wanted to rise, to throw herself back, but something huge and implacable pushed at her head and dragged over her. “Lord, forgive me for everything!” she said, feeling the impossibility of any struggle. A little muzhik, muttering to himself, was working over some iron. And the candle by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief and evil, flared up brighter than ever, lit up for her all that had once been in darkness, sputtered, grew dim, and went out for ever. 82

Like Ivan Ilyich, some understanding of the experience of death and the revelation of meaning is described. Anna’s subjective experience is revealed to the reader as death approaches. And we can also draw comparisons between Anna’s and Ivan Ilyich’s experience of death, in particular Tolstoy’s use of the symbol of light, made in reference to how Anna’s candle of light “flared up brighter than ever, lit up for her all that had once been in darkness.” This description relates to an earlier incident in the
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novel in which Anna lights candles to ward off the shadow of death\textsuperscript{83}: here Anna’s candle again wards of her feeling of dread in the face of death, and, like Ivan Ilyich, in death all is light.\textsuperscript{84} It should be noted that Tolstoy’s description of Anna’s experience of death is much less detailed in contrast to Ivan Ilyich’s death, a qualitative difference which can possibly be attributed to the fact that \textit{Ivan Ilyich} was written over a decade after \textit{Anna Karenina}, at a time when Tolstoy may have felt more confident in his abilities and reputation in representing the unknowable experience of death. This possibility notwithstanding, and irrespective of its less qualitative description, the example of Anna Karenina’s death illustrates how an omniscient narrator can enable the shivering reader to witness the unwitnessed death of the Other—the unwitnessed death becomes a privileged situation, and a gift for the reader.

\textbf{The Authority of the Author}

Although the convention of omniscient narration gives the reader a god-like experience of a character’s death, the question must be asked as to what authority does the novelist have to represent that which cannot be represented? More importantly, what authority does the novelist have to reveal the meaning of life when that authority belongs to the dying, alone? What can the novelist know of the Other’s death if the novelist, like the reader, has not experienced death? Indeed, to again quote Nathalie Sarraute: “Today’s reader is suspicious of what the author’s imagination has to offer him.”\textsuperscript{85} From this suspicion is born a new predilection for true facts (here one is reminded of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact). The author need not coax the reader by

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 768.
\item \textsuperscript{83} Troyat, \textit{Tolstoy}, 511.
\item \textsuperscript{84} An interesting comparison could be made between the death of Anna Karenina and that of Gustave Flaubert’s Emma Bovary—two characters whose stories are very similar, but whose revelations in death are very dissimilar insofar as Anna’s death is sublime and calm whereas Emma’s is maniacal and violent.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Sarraute, “The Age of Suspicion,” 57.
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over-imagination or experimentation: the reader wants to examine with the author the everyday experience of reality—the true facts that comprise reality. However, true facts are those spoken in the first-person, from the perspective of the “I”; but the death-scene cannot be told by the “I”. The reader is surely suspicious if any attempt is made to do just that. The question is thus again asked: “What is the authority of the author if they choose to tell a story they cannot truly know?”

To answer this question we will firstly look to the definitions of the terms author and authority. An “author,” as defined by the OED, is “the person who originates or gives existence to anything” and “he who gives rise to or causes an action, event, circumstance, state, or condition of things.” The novelist as author can be said to be the author of his or her characters insofar as they give existence to their characters and the characters’ stories. However, the term author is also understood in terms of authority: “he who authorises or instigates; the prompter or mover” or “the person on whose authority a statement is made; an authority, an informant; and "one who has authority over others; a director, ruler, commander." We can say that the author has “authority” over his or her characters and the stories they create. However, the author also has authority over his or her reader, as to be “in authority” is to be “in a position of power; in possession of power over others and of power over, or title to influence, the opinions of others; authoritative opinion; weight of judgement or opinion, intellectual influence” but is also to have the “power to inspire belief, title to be believed; authoritative statement; weight of testimony.”

What these various definitions suggest is that the author of the novel has not only the authoritative power to create and command his or her characters and the characters’ stories, but also has authoritative power over their reader, such that they compel their readers to accept and believe the stories they are being told, which may also include the author’s opinions, judgements, and even biases. But is this authority, this power of the author, justifiable? Here we may consider Blanchot’s meditations on Kafka and an excerpt from Kafka’s Diaries (dated December 1914) in which he says

86 Ibid., 58.
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that he “enjoys dying in the character who is dying.” Kafka also states that “the best of what I have written is based on this capacity to die content.” It is on this latter statement that Blanchot comments:

[This] sentence . . . has an attractive aspect stemming from its simplicity; nevertheless, it remains difficult to accept. What is this capacity? What is it that gives Kafka this assurance? Has he already come close enough to death to know how he will bear himself when he faces it? He seems to suggest that in the “good passages” of his writings—where someone is dying, dying an unjust death—he is himself at stake. Is it a matter, then, of an approach toward death accomplished under the cover of writing? The text does not say exactly that. It probably indicates an intimacy between the unhappy death which occurs in the work and the writer who enjoys this death. It excludes the cold, distant relation which allows an objective description. A narrator, if he knows the art of moving people, can recount in a devastating manner devastating events which are foreign to him. The problem in that case is one of rhetoric and the right one may or may not have to use it. But the mastery of which Kafka speaks is different, and the calculating tactic which authorises it is more profound. Yes, one has to die in the dying character, truth demands this. But one must be capable of satisfaction in death, capable of finding in the supreme dissatisfaction supreme satisfaction, and of maintaining, at the instant of dying, the clear-sightedness which comes from such a balance.87

Authority, it can be said in Kafka’s case, comes from a certain state of mind—a particular disposition towards death. Again, dying can be seen as the becoming one of the “they”—anonymous and objective.

But even if the writer is confident in his or her disposition for writing on death, we may now ask whether the strength of the author’s authority and conviction is based solely on his or her writing acclaim and skill, or is it the readers’ belief that authors may have a wealth of “life-experience,” from which he or she draws upon and writes about? Indeed, the content of life-experience is very similar to the wisdom of the dying, the

87 Blanchot, The Space of Literature, 91.
difference being that life-experience is that of the living and of those who have a living voice. But the question can again be asked: What authority can the living have for the living? What can the living novelist tell the living reader, especially in this age of suspicion? Benjamin would argue that the novelist can offer very little, as the novelist of the modern, capitalist age is “inspired” only by his or her own solitary, life-experiences; therefore, like the isolated, perplexed reader, the novelist of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is similarly isolated and perplexed: “The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others.”

The novelist theoretically relates only his or her own individual, subjective experiences, which contain very little in the way of wisdom, primarily because it is not drawn from the wealth of wisdom of others. As was briefly described in the “Introduction” above, for Benjamin, this isolation epitomises the “bourgeois” novelists’ ideology of modern individualism insofar as the modern novelists tell only of their own isolated, individual experiences, and what is of their own individual interest. In contrast, the pre-modern storytellers had a wealth of experience, primarily because of their more working-class backgrounds in which life-experiences could be easily shared. They had the authoritative wisdom that the modern reader seeks. Benjamin identifies two groups of storyteller: the seamen/travelling journeymen; and the peasant/master craftsman. The seamen and the journeymen travelled the world, gaining life-experience and worldly wisdom, and told the stories of their ventures to all those they met along the way, whereas the peasants and master craftsmen settled at home on their farms or workshops, tilling the soil, or crafting and weaving, respectively, listening, telling, and retelling the local tales and traditions. The stories were drawn from a wealth of wisdom in which no one storyteller was an authority—all the storytellers who pass on the stories were an authority, drawing upon the wisdom of these stories, whilst at the same time intertwining their own life-experiences and wisdom. The novelist did not

89 Ibid., 84–85.
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have this wealth of experience. Indeed, because of the novelist’s supposed isolation, it was common for the novelist to draw on the experiences of others. Indeed, it is because of the novelist’s isolation and lack of experience that he or she must look to other peoples’ experiences from which they derive their stories, particularly the representation of characters’ death-scenes—an experience which had become increasingly absent. Indeed, this absence necessarily gave reason for authors to draw upon other peoples’ stories of the experience of the death of the Other. Two examples in particular exemplify this “derivation of experience,” but each example treats this derivation in a different way. The first is the death-scene of the great, tragic hero of Nostromo in Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904); the second is the death of Ivan in Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, discussed above.

*Nostromo*

In her notes on the text in *Nostromo*, Vèronique Pauly draws attention to the fact that Conrad “sourced” Nostromo’s death from French short story writer and novelist, Guy de Maupassant and his short story “Hautot Father and Son,” written in 1889. This sourcing is clearly evidenced when the two texts are contrasted. To begin with Conrad’s *Nostromo*, we find Nostromo on his deathbed, having been accidentally shot and fatally wounded by Old Giorgio Viola—the father of Giselle whom Nostromo (Captain Fidanza) has been secretly courting. Viola mistakes Nostromo for Ramirez—Giselle’s other suitor and Nostromo’s successor as head of the Cargadores. Viola vehemently dislikes Ramirez because of the dishonour he is bringing to his home, especially with his “boasting . . . that he will carry [Giselle] off from the island.”90 Because of Ramirez’s boasting, Viola set about patrolling his island, ready to shoot Ramirez. Nostromo, however, is shot instead and his death is imminent. He is asked by an unnamed photographer if he has any “dispositions to make”:

Nostromo made no answer. The other did not insist, remaining huddled up on the stool, shock-headed, wildly hairy, like a hunchbacked monkey. Then, after a long silence—"Comrade Fidanza," he began solemnly, "you have refused all aid from that doctor. Is he really a dangerous enemy of the people?"

In the dimply-lit room Nostromo rolled his head slowly on the pillow and opened his eyes, directing at the weird figure perched by his bedside a glance of enigmatic and mocking scorn. Then his head rolled back, his eyelids fell, and the Capataz of the Cargadores died without a word or moan after an hour of immobility, broken by short shudders testifying to the most atrocious sufferings.\(^{91}\)

This description of Nostromo's death is clearly derived from Maupassant when we contrast it with Maupassant's short story:

But the dying man had closed his eyes, and he refused to open them again, refused to answer, refused to show, even by a sign, that he understood . . . He received the last rites, was purified and absolved, in the midst of his friends and servants on bended knee, without any movement of his face indicating that he was still alive. He died about midnight, after four hours of convulsive movement, which showed that he must have suffered dreadfully in his final moments.\(^{92}\)

What this contrast suggests is that whether or not Conrad has witnessed the death of the Other, the fact remains that, for the death-scene of Nostromo, he has derived his representation from a fictional source. This can be seen as "atypical" of Conrad who generally drew upon many of his life-experiences for his novels. Indeed, in Benjamin's eyes, Conrad—the sailor and master-mariner—would be regarded with the same esteem as the early storytellers, because he had a wealth of experience upon which to draw. However, Conrad's authority could be questioned in terms of his rendering of the experience of death. Why did he draw, if only in part, upon Maupassant's story?

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 444.
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Indeed, was Conrad somewhat apprehensive in rendering the death-scene of Nostromo, despite his very profound rendering of the revelation of Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, which appeared several years before *Nostromo*? Whatever the answers to these questions are, there remains some discrepancy of the authority of Conrad in his representation of the death of the Other. And yet Conrad does not elaborate on Maupassant’s story; he does not overstep what he, nor any other author, could know, such that his derivation is essentially innocuous and does little to undermine Conrad’s authority as a storyteller. To put it another way, Conrad does not “add” to the reader’s suspicions.

However, this innocuousness of Conrad’s *Nostromo* differs greatly from our second example: Tolstoy’s *Ivan Ilyich* in which Tolstoy not only derives his story from someone else’s experience, but also elaborates on the reported story.

*Ivan Ilyich*

Tolstoy’s story of the character Ivan Ilyich was based on the life and death of Ivan Ilich Mechnikov, a judge at the court of Tula, in 1881. The idea and details of Mechnikov’s death were “given” to Tolstoy by Mechnikov’s brother.93 This would suggest that the story of the “original” Ivan Ilich was reported to Tolstoy, but Tolstoy himself, did not experience or witness Ivan’s death: he re-tells Mechnikov’s story and elaborates on it, making it his own. However, unlike Conrad, Tolstoy endeavours to not only represent the *objective* experience of the death of Ivan Ilyich—the experience of a witness, observing Mechnikov’s death from a distant and limited point of view—but also represents Ivan’s *subjective* experience of death. Tolstoy “assumes” the authority of the imminently dying by representing both the subjective and objective position, and *invents* all or part of Ivan Ilyich’s experience of death. Indeed, the narrator tells the

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92 See Véronique Pauly’s notes in *Nostromo*, by Conrad, 489–90.
93 Troyat, *Tolstoy*, 638.
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story as if it were an event of the past, as if the narrator is the absolute authority—a God—seeing Ivan's objective and subjective experience of death.

Of course, Tolstoy has the freedom to invent whatever he so chooses—a freedom which is particular to the writer of fiction—even if it is of an experience which may be considered unknowable, such as death. Indeed, as E. M. Forster says of the writer of death:

There is scarcely anything that the novelist cannot borrow from “daily death”; scarcely anything he may not profitably invent. The doors of that darkness lie open to him and he can even follow his characters through it.94

Tolstoy follows Ivan Ilyich into the darkness. He conveys the “real” experiences which have been told to him, but he ventures beyond what was observed. Consider again the description of the death of Ivan Ilyich, how Ivan Ilyich had “fallen through the hole and caught sight of the light,” and how “in place of death there was light.” This description goes beyond what can be witnessed by those sharing the experience of the Other’s death; beyond the few verbal and visual forms of communication. From his third-person point of view, Tolstoy can be said to “know everything” about Ivan Ilyich, and experience all of his experiences. Indeed, Tolstoy, when formulating the story of Ivan Ilyich, used this third-person narration to enhance the impact of the story on his reader. As Troyat describes:

[Tolstoy's] original idea had been simply to write a diary of a man struggling with and then abandoning himself to death. But gradually he saw what the story might gain in tragic depth by being told in the third person, particularly in changes of lighting effects and camera angles. And the diary grew into a novel.95

94 Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 61.
95 Troyat, Tolstoy, 638.
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Tolstoy saw the limitations of representing the story of the death of Ivan Ilyich from an autobiographical point of view, and changed his narration to that of the third-person, enhancing the reader’s experience of Ivan’s death.

However, the question we may again ask is, “What can Tolstoy ‘know’ of the first-hand experience of death, when he, like his reader, has not genuinely experienced death—an experience reserved exclusively for the imminently dying?” Indeed, can anyone claim, with authority, to have intimate knowledge of the genuine experience of death? The answer would seemingly again be a resounding “no.” Even those individuals that claim to have had a near-death experience and have lived to tell of the experience cannot be said to have genuinely experienced death—their experience of death, it can be argued, is somewhat incomplete. Indeed, even if the imminently dying were able to convey the experience of their death, and their authoritative revelations of the meaning of their life, we must question the limitations of their own ability to convey their experience—an understanding and experience which could very easily be exhausted in its conveyance. Consider Marlow’s descriptions of the “rent veil” of Kurtz’s face, as he dies. Kurtz’s face seems to express that which is inexpressible—something that cannot be known by those who witness it. As has been stated, death can be “experienced” by those who surround the dying; however, it is the “diluted,” second-hand experience, of which little can be known or represented.

This inability of the “living” author endeavouring to write from the point of view of the imminently dying—to see death and express what one sees—is best illustrated in Emily Dickinson’s poem, “I Heard a Fly Buzz—When I Died” (P 465):

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—

The Stillness in the Room

Was like the Stillness in the Air—

Between the Heaves of Storm—

The Eyes around—had wrung them dry—
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And Breaths were gathering firm

For the last Onset—when the King

Be witnessed—in the Room—

I willed my Keepsakes—Signed away

What portion of me be

Assignable—and then it was

There interposed a Fly—

With Blue—uncertain—stumbling Buzz—

Between the light—and me—

And then the Windows failed—and then

I could not see to see—

The speaker, assumedly Dickinson, narrates the poem from a first-person, “role-playing” position, telling the reader of her imminent death. The speaker describes her typical “experience” of dying, such as the business of willing away the speaker’s keepsakes, but also her anticipation of the “promised” revelations beyond death, and the witnessing of “the King,” which is presumably Christ. However, a housefly interrupts her “transition” such that she “could not see to see.” Dickinson, in her role-playing, is endeavouring to see what is on the other side of death; however, the real world continues to interrupt this revelation. The speaker cannot “see” the images of revelation which is what she endeavours to see. All her knowledge of death, her actions, and expectations reflect the unknowability of death. She experiences death as the Other has told her to experience death. Indeed, Dickinson, as the voice behind the speaker, is only playing the role of the dying and therefore does not have the authority of the dying. And Dickinson seems to acknowledge her failure in endeavouring to do so. As Jane Donahue Eberwein describes:

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Not even by playing the role of a dead person, then, could Dickinson achieve perspective on the mysteries she wanted to probe. Imagination—although fused in a blending of dream and drama—could never fully place her outside the circuit, however she might pivot on its brink.\footnote{Ibid.}

Like Tolstoy’s *Ivan Ilyich*, the significance of Dickinson’s poem is that it is written from a position which is “unknowable” to both the author and the reader, be it acknowledged by the author, as can be interpreted from Dickinson’s poem, or unacknowledged and “authoritative,” in Tolstoy. This would suggest that no author has the authority to narrate the “genuine” experiences of the imminently dying from either a first- or third-person point of view: the imminently dying cannot narrate their own death, and the author cannot write the death of the imminently dying, except from the point of view of an objective witness to the death of the Other.

However, as was intimated above, the claim that the author does not have the authority to convey the unknowable, does not mean that the author cannot freely relate their imagined or invented thoughts and ideas from the point of view of the imminently dying. This is to say that novelists may not have the authority to represent the Other’s experience of death, but they do have the right to invent the experience of the Other’s death. Indeed, the novelist has the right to represent anything he or she so chooses. The question now is whether the “suspicious” reader authentically chooses to believe what is invented. As we have seen, Tolstoy ventures beyond knowable experience—he invents Ivan Ilyich’s experience of death, giving the reader an insight into what is an unknown. But what Tolstoy is also doing is deceiving the reader. Indeed, as Wayne C. Booth describes in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, omniscient narration is one of fiction’s most significant devices but also one of the novelist’s best “tricks”:
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One of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart. Whatever our ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story, artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know.\(^{98}\)

That the reader can know what no one could possibly know is an overt deception created by the omniscient narrator. And yet the reader somewhat inauthentically accepts that he or she is being deceived. Indeed, as Booth suggests, it is “strange” that the reader trusts the novelist even more so than they would the most reliable witness.\(^{99}\)

This openness for deception when “experiencing” the death of Ivan Ilyich would appear to be symptomatic of the fear of death and the anxiety of meaning insofar as any insight, be it real or fictional, would warm the shivering reader. The omniscient narrator gives the shivering reader a gift of unknown experience which the reader willingly and inauthentically accepts. It is a gift that seemingly surpasses the value of the real revelations of the real dying Other’s, despite the inherent authority and sublimity of these real revelations. Of course, as will be described in the following chapter, this gift is not always explicitly given through the dying’s revelations but comes from the reader’s implicit interpretations and evaluations of the novel’s narrative discourse.

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\(^{99}\) Ibid.
Implicit Interpretation and Evaluation

We have seen how death-scenes in fiction are, for the shivering reader, privileged situations, giving the reader a warming insight into the experience of death and the revelation of the meaning of life. Indeed, the representation of the death of a fictional character is the greatest gift that the reader can "receive" because fiction makes it possible for the reader to access an experience which is, in reality, inaccessible. And we have seen how Leo Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Ilyich is the sublime example of the possibilities of fiction as it represents the absolute, subjective experience of Ivan Ilyich's death. However, very few death-scenes in fiction give the reader this level of access because very few examples represent the dying fictional character's complete, subjective experience of death. Indeed, two of the examples discussed in the previous chapter, those of Citizen Kane and Mr. Kurtz, are presented to the reader from a purely objective point of view—we do not see "Rosebud" when Kane is dying, nor do we see the vision which prompts Kurtz to speak his enigmatic final words "the horror, the horror." Indeed, as Thomas Docherty notes, it is not Kurtz...
but Marlow who speaks Kurtz’s final words when he tells his story. Marlow is *impersonating* Kurtz; he is not only interpreting Kurtz’s words but trying to recreate them by speaking as Kurtz.¹ We should also note that in film there is also another level of interpretation: the actor must interpret Marlow’s words—an interpretation which is demonstrated in their speech and vocal features such as intonation, stress, emphasis, and timbre.² As Seymour Chatman describes, from the three radio and filmic adaptations of *Heart of Darkness*—Orson Welles’s two radio broadcasts (1938), Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now!* and Nicholas Roeg’s *Heart of Darkness* (1994)—we can have (if we were to include both the directors and actors) up to five varied interpretations of the pronunciation of Kurtz’s final words:

We don’t know how Welles would have said them in the film, but we do have records of the two radio versions . . . in which Welles played both Marlow and Kurtz. After Marlow sets the context with the exclamation, “What are you looking at?” Kurtz’s vaguely Slavic, breathy, guttural answer sounds self-loathing and guilt-ridden, as if, like Macbeth, he were staring hell in the face. The Kurtz of Roeg’s film, on the other hand, as played by John Malkovich, intones “The horror!” ethereally, meditatively, more a philosophical question than a tormented plaint. Marlon Brando’s dying words are whispered, as in Conrad’s original description: “He cried in a whisper . . . a cry that was no more than a breath.” They might refer to his assassination by Willard as much as to his own moral condition or the state of the world.³

To these verbal interpretations we can add the actor’s facial gestures which are also very important as they can communicate a great deal to the viewer. What this description suggests is that, from our objective point of view, we must—like Orson Welles, Francis Ford Coppola, Marlon Brando, Nicholas Roeg, and John Malkovich—interpret these words and make meaning. To do this—to understand both Charles Foster Kane’s and Kurtz’s words—we must understand the *context* of Kane and Kurtz’s

¹ Docherty, *Reading (Absent) Character*, 64.
² Chatman, “2½ Film Versions of *Heart of Darkness*,” 207.
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words, which is to say that we must make a connection between their words and their past lives—the events that have culminated in their death. We must know of the “unsound” actions Kurtz has taken in the Congo, the journey he has taken, and the horrors he has experienced. Like Marlow, we must see the “evidence” of horror. We must see the “black, dried, sunken” heads on stakes, posted outside Kurtz’s house; we must know of Kurtz’s isolation and we must journey with Marlow into Kurtz’s “heart of darkness.” Only then can we make a claim of some understanding of what Kurtz sees in death. Indeed, we must undertake a similar task as the reporters attempting to find the meanings of Kane’s words: we must connect the word Rosebud to some “thing” in Kane’s past. We must connect it to a horse, or a woman, or any number of other possible “things.” This difficulty does not only exist in the pinning down of meaning but also has its difficulties because of the nature of language. This is evidenced if we consider the special relationship between meaning and language, specifically the distinction between language and utterance and the role of language in expression. To make this connection we can firstly look to Edmund Husserl and his phenomenological theory of “true” language where meaning “is not just meaning in the sense that words mean, but in the sense that someone means them to mean.” Meaning is willed and intended by an utterer; thus, in the case of Citizen Kane, the “true” meaning of the utterance “Rosebud” is Kane’s thought of his sleigh, which is “seen” within his individual mind. Moreover, in Husserl’s understanding, to know the meaning of a speaker’s words is essentially to “look straight into the speaker’s mind.”

To know “Rosebud” is to know Kane. But the reporters do not know the intention of the word “Rosebud.” Indeed, even if they were aware that Rosebud is a sleigh, they still cannot know the inexhaustible depths of Kane’s mind. Another connection can also be made here if we were to consider Jacques Derrida’s examination of the role of language in expression. Derrida’s task is to undermine Husserl’s theory, by claiming

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3 Ibid, 207–208.
4 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, 94.
5 Harland, Superstructuralism, 126.
6 Ibid.
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that “true” language does not belong to the speaker but is a self-sufficient system, independent of human beings. For Derrida, “true” language is exemplified by “writing” where it “exists” and “acts” without the speaker who can be either absent or even dead. As such, the speaker is no longer “there” to support the meaning of the words. They are independent from the speaker such that any intention is lost. With regards to Kane, his words are not “written down” but they are maintained independent of him and without his support. As a result, Kane is dead but “Rosebud” continues to act because the reporters attach meanings to “Rosebud.”

In order to attach meanings to a word which is unattached to an individual—for example, the utterer’s death-speech—we must find other signs—other words and other evidence—which belong to the individual’s past. We must collect data. This activity is even more important when we consider two other problems of the communication of the dying. The first, which is intimated above, is the ever-present difficulty in communicating in words what we see with our eyes, especially what we see within the mind. Just as we cannot easily see into another individual’s mind through his or her words, neither can we easily communicate what we see in our minds in order to enable others access to our own minds. Language limits what we endeavour to express. Indeed, a picture, as they say, is worth a thousand words, but even then words cannot “represent” a picture. The words Kurtz uses to express what he sees—the image or vision of horror—are essentially a poor representation of the much more meaningful image or vision seen only in Kurtz’s mind’s eye. Kurtz’s experience of “horror” is necessarily understated by the word horror. Indeed, Kurtz’s experience of horror would be understated by even a hundred thousand words. The dying Other can only exhaust themselves in their efforts to find the words to convey their sublime revelations to their perplexed witnesses. As Bertrand Russell states in a letter to his close friend, and former lover, Ottoline Morrell (11th August, 1918): “The things one says are all unsuccessful attempts to say something else—something that perhaps by its very

\[\text{Ibid., 127–28.}\]
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nature cannot be said."\(^8\) The sublime revelations of the dying are precisely an example of something that perhaps, by its very nature, cannot be said. It can also be argued that, even when the dying’s words are communicated and received by the witness, we must still recognise that the meanings of words are in many ways plastic, contingent, and multifarious, especially because they are no longer attached to the utterer. What the word _horror_ means to Marlow would differ from that of Kurtz. Indeed, the word _Rosebud_ is essentially meaningless without a context to place it. The reporters connect the word _Rosebud_ to their own subjective contexts, giving us the various interpretations of _Rosebud_ as a woman, or a racehorse. The word _Rosebud_ may “sound” like a horse that a reporter once bet on himself, or may “sound” like a woman a reporter once dated himself.\(^9\) Indeed, none of the reporters connect _Rosebud_ to the most obvious definition of the word: “a bud of a rose.”\(^10\)

The second reason why we may need to know more of a character’s past to understand his or her life’s meaning is the fact that not all characters can or do communicate their dying revelations. Consider, for example, the death of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville’s _Moby-Dick_ (1851). On what is to be the final day, and his final assault, of his monomaniacal chase for the elusive Moby Dick—the whale that has scarred him both on the outside and within—Ahab makes what can be described as his final “death-speech”:

“I turn my body from the sun. What ho, Tashtego! let me hear thy hammer. Oh! ye three unsurrendred spires of mine; thou uncracked keel; and only god-bullied hull; thou firm deck, and haughty helm, and Pole-pointed prow,—death-glorious ship! must ye then perish, and without me? Am I cut off from the last fond pride of meanest shipwrecked captains? Oh, lonely death on lonely life! Oh, now I feel my topmost greatness lies in topmost grief. Ho, ho! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death! Towards thee I roll, thou

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\(^9\) One of the definitions of “rosebud” in the _OED_ is a dated British term for “a pretty young woman.”

\(^10\) See _OED_.

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all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! and since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I give up the spear\textsuperscript{11}

Ahab recognises that this encounter with the whale could be his last, and he has prepared himself for death; however, it is not necessarily an “authoritative” revelation, especially when contrasted with the death-scenes of Kane or Kurtz. Moreover, unlike Kane’s and Kurtz’s final words, Ahab’s speech is not necessarily a revelation in the face of imminent death, especially if we consider the narration of the action that follows:

\begin{quote}
The harpoon was darted; the stricken whale flew forward; with igniting velocity the line ran through the groove;—ran foul. Ahab stooped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Despite Ahab’s proclamation in his death-speech that his death is imminent, his death is very much an “accident.” Ahab’s actions suggest that he had no knowledge of what would become of him as he thrust the harpoon into the White Whale. Indeed, Ahab struggles to untangle the line—a desperate attempt to avoid injury or death—but he is inevitably caught by the harpoon’s line, and is suddenly “gone.” He could have avoided death, whereas Kane and Kurtz could not. Of course, Ahab does “experience” dying, but his death goes unseen as it is veiled by the blackness of the sea from which neither sight nor sound can escape. Ahab’s death is “voiceless,” and no final gestures are witnessed or recounted by Ishmael—the narrator of the story. And for this very reason the shivering reader can draw no warming insights from Ahab at the moment of his death. The reader cannot know of Ahab’s regrets, his pleasures, his revelations, as his life ends.

\textsuperscript{11} Melville, \textit{Moby-Dick}, 622–23.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 623.
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However, what the death of Ahab does give the reader is a boundary for interpretation and evaluation as Ahab becomes a dead life for the reader. Indeed, where we have previously said that we should firstly look to the Other and listen to what they tell us, we must now console ourselves by looking at the Other as if they were a “dumb” object. It is a lesser gift, but nevertheless valuable as the shivering reader can derive some understanding of Ahab’s life and his meaning by looking at the narration of Ahab’s story which precedes his death. This is to say that the shivering reader has the freedom to implicitly interpret and evaluate Ahab’s dead life and derive some meaning from his life. Thus, Ahab’s life is still a gift for the shivering reader, albeit a lesser gift when compared to examples such as Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich.

Interpretation and Evaluation as “Wholeness”

When talking of a character’s death and its relation to the character’s past, we must also note two claims that are not being made, both of which are especially pertinent when interpreting and, more importantly, evaluating the dead life of character. The first concerns the relation between the act of suicide and the meaning of life, and how suicide does not necessarily define the meaning of one’s life, or supersede one’s past actions. David Cooper claims that “a heroic martyrdom [cannot] turn an otherwise worthless existence into a triumphant one. . . . A beautiful death is worth a whole life—or, better, they are equivalent in value.”¹³ This is to say that one’s final “glorious” act of martyrdom does not necessarily permeate one’s inglorious past life simply because a life “gains” its meaning through its completeness—its wholeness. The meanings of our projects are a lifetime in the making, and are laden with nuance, contingency, and subtlety and, thus, cannot be overturned on a whim or flight of fancy. Thus, to again use the example of the character of Anna Karenina, we should not interpret or evaluate the life of Anna Karenina just on her final act of suicide—her act of revenge—inasmuch

¹³ Cooper, Existentialism, 138–39.
as we know that her life was much more than this. Her final act of revenge, and the way she chooses to die, should not colour her whole life.\textsuperscript{14}

The second claim that we must dismiss is the claim that to have a complete and meaningful life one must live to a certain age; to have a complete, meaningful life, one must ideally die of old age, whereas a life cut short by sudden death would be considered “incomplete” and meaningless, as our outstanding projects would fall into the absurd. This is an assertion that will be discussed further in the following chapters; however, for the present examination of death, our position will be to the contrary: a life cut short by sudden death is just as complete and whole as the lives of those who die of old age, insofar as both are \textit{structurally} complete—sudden death still creates a boundary to a life just as death of old age is a boundary to a life. However, what the meaning of that life is—a life that is cut short—may be very different in an \textit{interpretive} sense because of the short temporality of the life. As Benjamin claims:

\begin{quote}
A man . . . who died at thirty-five will appear to \textit{remembrance} at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life. The nature of the character in the novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the “meaning” of his life is revealed only in his death.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

This is to say that we can still interpret the meaning of the deceased’s life but we will contextualise the deceased’s life in terms of the age at which he or she dies, and in terms of the meaningful projects they undertook within that shorter temporal frame. It is this temporal ending which continues to influence how the deceased is remembered and how the deceased’s life is interpreted and evaluated.

\textsuperscript{14} Whether we do indeed evaluate a person’s whole life is of course a different issue. “Celebrities” particularly are not often evaluated by their whole lives and, indeed, it is often their less significant, sometimes tragic later lives which colour the successes of their past lives.

But what does it really mean to say that we interpret and evaluate the dead life of the Other? The first qualification would be that the interpretation of the fictional Other’s life comes before evaluation as the shivering reader must firstly “collate” the “data”—the signs—of a character’s life before evaluating the collation. More specifically, the reader must firstly understand what the character’s intended meaningful project is and decide whether the character has achieved this intended meaning, before then evaluating this meaning. This process of evaluation is comparable to E. D. Hirsch’s claim that, for a reader to evaluate a text, the reader must firstly understand what the author’s subjective intention for the text was, and only then can the reader objectively evaluate the accomplishment of this intention. Hirsch goes on to say that: “Evaluation is constantly distinguishing between intention and accomplishment.” Similarly, in order to begin to evaluate the lives of the fictional Other, it is necessary to have some understanding of their subjective intentions, before objectively evaluating the success of these intentions.

The “success” of these intentions is what is “revealed” in death. To use the example of Ivan Ilyich, Ivan chooses his intended project of becoming a judge, an occupation which, in very simple terms, would make him happy and his life meaningful; however, in death, it is revealed to Ivan that his intended project was not meaningful. Ivan’s intention does not correspond with his revelation and is, therefore, unsuccessful. Here we see the most fundamental relationship for making meaning of our personal narratives, but also the fundamental cause for anxiety: intention is an expectation of an intended revelation, but in death this expectation may be frustrated. Interpretation is an understanding of what was intended and what is revealed—what was accomplished—and, put simply, evaluation decides whether this intention was accomplished and, if accomplished, whether it was a meaningful intention.

16 Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 12.
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The necessity for an understanding of both a character’s intention and revelation of meaning for the process of interpretation and evaluation can also be illustrated by Frank Kermode’s analogy in The Sense of an Ending of the *tick-tock* sounds that a clock makes, which Kermode takes as the model for a plot: “*Tick* is our word for a physical beginning, *tock* our word for an end. We say they differ. What enables them to be different is a special kind of middle.”\(^{17}\) This analogy also loosely corresponds to our personal narratives: the *tock* of *tick-tock* corresponds to the revelation of meaning; the *tick* corresponds to the choice of an intended meaning; and the middle corresponds to the creation of this intended meaning. This is also to say that *tock* is only meaningful when we “hear” the *tick* which precedes it. For example, “The horror” and “Rosebud” are the “*tocks*” of the lives of Kurtz and Kane, respectively; but they are meaningless when isolated from their past life—they are meaningless without the *tick*. These characters are only valuable to the shivering reader if they have complete personal narratives—the *tick* and the *tock* of *tick-tock*—and are only valuable if their intended choices, actions, and revelations of their personal narratives are communicated and represented, or, at the very least, implied within the novel’s discourse. Indeed, as Kermode suggests, the plot of *tick-tock* creates an “expectation” of the reader:

> [Novelists] have to defeat the tendency of the interval between *tick* and *tock* to empty itself; to maintain within that interval following *tick* a lively expectation of *tock*, and a sense that however remote *tock* may be, all that happens happens as if *tock* were certainly following. All such plotting presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning.\(^{18}\)

The shivering reader does not derive warmth only from the choices (the *ticks*) made by a character, isolated from what came before and after the character’s choice: the value


\(^{18}\) Ibid., 46.
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of a character lies in the representation of the character’s complete personal narrative (the *tick and tock*).

But as has been described above, not all characters explicitly reveal the meaning of their lives in death. The reader may hear the *tick* but may not hear an explicit *tock*. However, because death provides a boundary for interpretation of a character’s dead life, it can be said that a character’s death implicitly “reveals” the meaning of the character’s life—the reader hears the *tock* as part of his or her interpretation. This is to say that the *tock* is implicit at the ending of the character’s life just as the *tock* is implied by the ending of the plot; therefore, it is still possible for the reader to interpret and evaluate a character’s life.

It must be noted that Kermode’s analogy of *tick-tock* has faced some criticism because, although it accurately describes the teleology of the realist novel, it cannot necessarily be applied to the modern or postmodern novel. Kermode does discuss the possibility of the *tock-tick* plot as a reflection of the modern novel’s plot, but, as Thomas Docherty argues, Kermode still insists upon placing emphasis on the same kind of “end” as in the simple plot. His *tock-tick* is seen to be working within a larger but unarticulated framework of (*tick*)*tock-*

* *tick*(tock), and the reader transforms *chronos* into *kairos* by articulating a meaningful plot.

This is unsatisfactory for dealing with some recent fiction. 19

Docherty claims that there are essentially three types of plot which are dependent on three views of time, history, and personal continuity. The first is the “tick-tick” plot which is like that described by Kermode, where history is seen as being progressive and evolutionary. This is essentially the realist plot and supports the “idea of an individual linear continuity of character.” 20

The second type of plot, which is essentially that of modernist texts, such as *Finnegans Wake* and *The Search of Lost Time*, is circular and takes the form of “tick-tock-tick.” In this view, history is seen as cyclic and

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therefore static and “artificially attains to a spatial consistency and continuity of character, seen in terms of repetition, duplication of character in time.”\textsuperscript{21} The third type of plot is essentially that of the postmodern text and takes the form of “tock-tick”: “This kind will acknowledge ‘gaps’ in time, and views history as being discontinuous, radically revolutionary, and as happening now, in the present”\textsuperscript{22} and “often dispense entirely with the continuity of the discrete individual.”\textsuperscript{23}

Ursula K. Heise makes a similar claim regarding Kermode’s narrative theory. However, Heise disputes the viability of this model because of its implicit emphasis on the contextual understanding of our lives in relation to death and endings:

What make this type of narrative theory so seductive is that it bases itself on the universal human fact of death, as did the time philosophies of Freud, Heidegger and Sartre. But this universality is problematic in so far as it leads to the assumption that narrative as a genre is fundamentally invariant across cultures and historical periods; although its forms of appearance might change, its function for human temporal experience remains constant, and therefore narrative always retains an underlying temporal structure that defines the genre. None of these theories allows for the possibility that the human experience of time depends on cultural contexts that are themselves subject to change. Recent cultural theory has made us acutely aware that biological fact only becomes “natural” or “universal” through the operation of culture; in light of this insight, a theory of narrative that is based on an allegedly transhistorical experience of time appears questionable: the fact that mortality is a physical necessity for the individual by no means proves its universal cultural relevance.\textsuperscript{24}

Heise’s claims are important as both Kermode’s and Benjamin’s theories can indeed be viewed as problematic when historically or culturally universalised. However, the argument of this thesis is that the relation of death and narrative is indeed historically

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 135–36.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{24} Heise, *Chronoschisms*, 48.
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and culturally contextual: the shivering reader is a product of the modern world in which God is dead. This is also why existential philosophy is important as it is the philosophy of the isolated individual, thrown into the godless world without instruction. The shivering reader is authentically disposed towards death and endings. This is also why it can be argued that, of the three plot types described by Docherty, the most valuable to the shivering reader is that of the realist novel as it most resembles the organisation of our “real” personal narratives, or at least how we perceive them to be organised. This is only understood if we take the event of death as a retrospective unifying principle of our contingent “identities” which, in life, may not have appeared to be continuous or historical. Indeed, it can be argued that postmodern fiction does represent, through its characters, what is essentially the “reality” of everyday life as being contingent and contextual, is ahistorical and lived only in the present; but this is to understate the reality of our projection and invention of a meaningful future—projection which is also related to an awareness of our past. Here we are not wholly dispensing with the reality of the representations of characters of postmodern fiction, but are considering the value of such characters to the shivering reader who is creating a meaningful life through his or her projects and is also looking to fictional characters—characters of realist fiction—for wisdom in choosing these projects.

The Personal Narrative as a Template for the Realist Novel

The argument, therefore, is that the structure of our personal narratives somewhat resembles the structure of a realist fictional plot, insofar as Kermode’s description of the function of the events of a plot (the tick-tock of a plot) resemble the basic functions of our personal narratives: tick is an intention—a choice of project— which is only meaningful through the future expectation of tock—a revelation. However, it can be argued that the narrative of realist fiction—specifically the narrative structure of the realist novel—not only resembles our personal narratives but imitates the structure of
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our personal narratives. This is to say that the template of fiction is derived from the template of our lives. This may appear to be a self-evident statement insofar as human beings generally write stories about human beings’ stories. Indeed, in more contemporary theory, it is pointed out that “narrative” is not confined to literature but is “central to the representation of identity, in personal memory and self-representation”25; further, as Paul Ricoeur describes in his analysis on the correlation between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience, “time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.”26 Similar to Ricoeur, the argument here is not that our lives are personal narratives which resemble those of fiction, but that, if we examine the function and themes of the narrative events of a novel’s plot, we begin to see that the events of the plot and the mode of narration correlate to specifically existential events which imitate the existential events of our personal narratives. But, more importantly, what we also see is that there is no plot without a personal narrative. Indeed, where Benjamin suggests that the meaning of life is the centre about which the novel moves, we could really say that a character’s meaningful projects—the events of a character’s personal narrative—is the centre about which the novel moves. This further suggests that character is interdependent with the novel’s story: the character cannot be independent of plot, nor can plot be independent of character. The plot is the character’s created meaningful project. This is not necessarily a profound argument; indeed, questions on the independence and interdependence of story and character have been discussed since Aristotle’s Poetics, written between 347 and 322 BCE. And from this early beginning, a variety of positions have been maintained, which Chatman summarises and comments on in Story and Discourse:

Aristotle and the Formalists and some structuralists subordinate character to plot, make it a function of plot, a necessary but derivative consequence of the chrono-logic of story.

25 Currie, Postmodern Narrative Theory, 2.
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One could equally argue that character is supreme and plot derivative, to justify the modernist narrative in which “nothing happens,” that is, the events themselves do not form an independent source of interest, for example, a puzzle or the like. But to me the question of “priority” or “dominance” is not meaningful. Stories only exist where both events and existents occur. There cannot be events without existents. And though it is true that a text can have existents without events (a portrait, a descriptive essay), no one would think of calling it a narrative.27

As Chatman states, story and characters have an interdependent relationship; as such, it can be argued that most, if not all, realist fiction and, indeed, modern fiction, primarily centres on the representation of characters’ personal narratives. The novel’s story is derived from the action of the character’s life—action which is driven by the presence of possibilities and choice and the making of the choice itself. Indeed, the reality of the world “outside” of our selves has no plot—it is pure chronology; the reality outside our subjectivity is chronos, the simple passing of time. It is an indefatigable series of “and thens” and meaningless causal chains. As such, there is no “meaningful” story.

But, as Kermode states, “human intervention” creates story by filling time with significance. Time becomes kairos and the moments of time are “charged with a meaning derived from its relation to the end.”28 These moments are our meaningful choices. We create story by choosing beginnings (intentions) and ends (revelations) and by finding meaning in these inventions. For Kermode, this “humanisation” of time also relates to the “special kind of middle” of tick-tock:

We can perceive a duration only when it is organised. . . . The fact that we call the second of the two related sounds tock is evidence that we use fictions to enable the end to confer organisation and form on the temporal structure. The interval between the two sounds, between tick and tock is now charged with significant duration. The clock’s tick-tock I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organisation that humanises time by

26 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 52.
27 Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 113.
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giving it form; and the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely successive, disorganised time of the sort that we need to humanise.\(^29\)

Thus, plotting is a humanising of time by human choice and action, and all plotting in fiction is interdependent with character. And human beings plot stories for themselves and for their fictional stories; but it is the plotting of the former which provides the template for the latter.

But a second implication of the interdependence of character and story is that this relationship is also essential for the individualisation of fictional characters and for the individual freedom of characters. This is evident if we consider how the concept of the freedom of a character conflicts with Aristotle’s claim that, in a story, character is added *after* action:

In literature, or at least in literature as understood by Aristotle, the poet begins with action. Action involves agents, and the key traits of the agents are determined before “character” is added. For example, the most essential trait of Macbeth is determined by the fact that he murders Duncan. He can approach the murder timidly; he can be eager to perform it; he can be merciful; or he can sadistically prolong his victim’s agonies. Regardless of the chosen alternative, he must be capable of committing murder, and the murder is determined by the action.\(^30\)

Macbeth has the freedom to choose *how* he will murder Duncan; however, he is not “free” to choose whether or not he will murder Duncan. *What* Macbeth does is determined before he chooses *how* he will do it. And, so, he is not “existentially” free and, as a fictional character, is not an accurate representation of how we choose in reality. This may seem to be an unnecessary distinction to make, but it must be said that if characters are to be considered to be realistic, and of value to the shivering reader, then their actions must not be “predetermined” in any way; they must have the

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 45.
\(^{30}\) Hardison, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 125.
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semblance of freedom, which is to say that they must appear to be free to choose what actions they will take. The semblance of freedom is essential for a character to be considered as a realistic equal—as being verisimilar to a human being. This is the value of the realist novel to the shivering reader: the reader’s life is not predetermined, and is thus cause for the reader’s anxiety towards the question of the meaning he or she will choose; to allay this anxiety, the reader looks to characters who are faced with a similar situation—whose destinies are not predetermined and whose choices are made with the same vertiginous anxiety as the reader. Warmth is drawn only from those characters that face the same anxiety from their condemnation to choose as the shivering reader.

Events as Actions and Happenings

However, as was intimated above, one of the most significant and (for the shivering reader) the most important justification for maintaining the interdependence of story and character can be made on a functional level. This is evidenced when we contrast the similarities of the functional events of our personal narratives with those in fiction. To understand the nature of these functions we will begin with Chatman’s description of the two types of functional events of a narrative:

Events are either actions (acts) or happenings. Both are changes of state. An action is a change of state brought about by an agent or one that affects a patient. If the action is plot-significant, the agent or patient is called a character. Thus the character is narrative—though not necessarily grammatical—subject of the narrative predicate.

A happening entails a predication of which the character or other focused existent is narrative object: for example, The storm cast Peter adrift. Thus in “Peter tried to pull down the sails, but felt the mast give way and the boat caught up by an enormous wave,”
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Peter is the subject of a series of actions at the surface, manifestational level. At the
deeper story level he is narrative object, the affected not the effector.31

As Chatman’s example illustrates, if the event is a happening, then a character makes
choices only on a superficial level: Peter makes superficial choices, but, in reality, his
choices and his actions are determined by an exterior force—the storm—such that on a
deeper level Peter is an object being acted upon.32 But it can be argued that the storm
is merely a “limiting factor” to his possibilities, similar to that of one’s existential facticity.
Peter cannot choose to not be in the storm, as much as he cannot choose not to be
born male, or choose not to be thrown into existence. He can only choose how he will
act in the storm, as he would choose to “act” as a male. What this suggests is that
happenings, choices, and actions are interdependent with our meaningful projects. And
yet happenings, like the limiting factors of facticity—like the happening that is our
“thrownness” into the world—do not give us meaning or even create meaning: it is our
choices, our responses to happenings (such as our facticity or thrownness), which
create meaning.

This is best illustrated by another example from Melville’s Moby-Dick. Ishmael
has “taken to the ship”—the Pequod—on a whaling voyage as a “substitute for pistol
and ball”—a choice against suicide. His choice to take to the ship is a meaningful
project against meaninglessness. Of course, unbeknownst to Ishmael and the
Pequod’s crew, Captain Ahab’s intention for them is not merely to hunt whales for oil,
but to hunt and kill one particular whale—Moby Dick. It is not a hunt for oil, but for
Ahab’s vengeance. Only when the Pequod has set sail does Ahab announce his
monomaniacal project:

31 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 44–45.
32 It could also be argued that our choices cause happenings. It was Peter’s choice to sail that
day and the outcome of this choice was finding himself in a storm. He may not have desired this
outcome, but it was brought about by him nonetheless.
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“. . . this is what ye have shipped for, men! to chase that white whale on both sides of land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out. What say ye, men, will ye splice hands on it, now? I think ye do look brave.”

“Aye, aye!” shouted the harpooners and seamen, running closer to the excited old man: “A sharp eye for the White Whale; a sharp lance for Moby Dick!”

All the crew agree to pursue the whale with Ahab such is his “irresistible dictatorship,”—all except the chief mate, Mr Starbuck, who plainly states to Ahab: “I came here to hunt whales, not my commander’s vengeance.” But it is the initially acquiescent Ishmael who also finds himself increasingly disconcerted with the situation:

Such a crew, so officered, seemed specially picked and packed by some infernal fatality to help him to his monomaniac revenge. How it was that they so abundantly responded to the old man’s ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his; how all this came to be—what the White Whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life,—all this to explain, would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go. The subterranean miner that works in us all, how can one tell whither leads his shaft by the ever shifting, muffled sound of his pick? Who does not feel the irresistible arm drag? What skiff in tow of a seventy-four can stand still? For one, I gave myself up to the abandonment of the time and the place; but while yet all arush to encounter the whale, could see naught in the brute but the deadliest ill.

In crude terms, Ahab is to Ishmael, what the storm is to Peter: Ishmael and Peter are both equally free to act in the face of the happenings—the effectors—of Ahab and the storm, respectively. But where Peter’s choices are seemingly determined, Ishmael’s

34 Bersani, “Incomparable America,” 215.
36 Ibid., 203.
choices seem less determined, as, despite the overwhelming force of direction of Ahab and his loyal crew, Ishmael can make choices such as choosing to lead a mutiny against Ahab, or choosing to leave the *Pequod* as it encounters some eight other whaling ships on its hunt for Moby Dick. These possibilities may not be characteristic of Ishmael’s past actions as he does not have the tendencies of being a traitor or a deserter (as is understood by the reader’s limited knowledge of Ishmael’s past), but Ishmael, like Peter, still remains a free individual and is free to choose how he is to act in the face of this happening. Thus, Ahab does not determine Ishmael’s actions, in the same way that the storm determines Peter’s perfunctory actions. In a sense, Ahab’s project is a happening to Ishmael, but Ishmael must choose to accept or deny the happening. The external happening causes internal choice and action.

But what of sudden happenings, sudden contingencies, where no choice appears to be possible. To answer this question we must consider that death is the only happening where no choice is possible—it is the possibility which ends all possibilities. Death is a dispossession of our life and a dispossession of our freedom to choose, and so our created stories must end. Similarly, if a fictional character dies—death “happens” to a character—then the events and actions that follow must, if the story is to continue, become those of another character, a character that lives on. The story must necessarily shift its focus to the actions of other characters. Indeed, when Anna Karenina dies, story-time—“the duration of the purported events of the narrative”\(^37\)—continues and the action shifts to the choices and actions of Konstantin Levin. It is his story which moves the novel’s story.

And yet it can be argued that the sudden death of a central character—the true protagonist—is often handled in such a way that its suddenness is not really sudden at all, but an ending befitting of the character’s actions and the reader’s expectations. Indeed, endings are expected by the reader of fiction, and a “proper” ending is expected for the novel and for its protagonist. Consider, for example, the scene from

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\(^{37}\) Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 62.
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Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, when, by the order of Kurtz, Marlow’s ship is attacked. As Marlow describes:

“I was looking down at the sounding-pole, and feeling much annoyed to see at each try a little more of it stick out of that river, when I saw my poleman give up the business suddenly, and stretch himself flat on the deck, without even taking the trouble to haul his pole in. He kept hold on it though, and it trailed in the water. At the same time the fireman, whom I could also see below me, sat down abruptly before his furnace and ducked his head. I was amazed. Then I had to look at the river mighty quick, because there was a snag in the fairway. Sticks, little sticks, were flying about—thick: they were whizzing before my nose, dropping below me, striking behind me against my pilot-house. All this time the river, the shore, the woods, were very quiet—perfectly quiet. I could only hear the heavy splashing thump of the stern-wheel and the patter of these things. We cleared the snag clumsily. Arrows, by Jove! We were being shot at!”

Arrows are suddenly being fired, and Marlow, the narrator is not killed, but a shipmate—the fireman—is. Of course, Marlow, the major, central character and narrator must survive as there would be no story to tell; however, even if the story were narrated in the third-person, it could be argued that the reader’s expectations of the meeting of Marlow and Kurtz (what is essentially the *tock* of *tick-tock*)—an expectation created by the preceding discourse (*tick*)—would be frustrated. It would not make for a “good” story, or a “structurally” sound story, which is expected by the reader of realist fiction. The reader’s expectations would be similarly frustrated if Ahab were accidentally killed before the *Pequod’s* “climactic” encounter with Moby Dick. As was intimated above,

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38 Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 75. This passage is of course of particular significance in that it is an example of “delayed decoding”—a term coined by Ian Watt to describe a particular impressionistic narrative device of Conrad. Watt suggests that the device of delayed decoding “combines the forward temporal progression of the mind, as it receives messages from the outside world, with the much slower reflexive process of making out their meaning.” Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, 175. However, what is also interesting about this description is that it somewhat resembles how we each come to understand the meaning of the world and the meaning of our existence within the world: we are each suddenly “thrown” into the world without instruction; and we see the outside world, we exist within the world, we choose, and we act, but the definitive meaning of these choices and actions will not be understood until after the fact.
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these expectations of the reader may differ for the reader of modern and postmodern fictions, but for the realist novel reader the expectation and desire is of a satisfactory closure, which does not frustrate the mode of intention and revelation, or the structure of tick-tock. Thus, the only real possible happening is death, but it is a happening that occurs at an appropriate time, at the end of a character’s completed story. This structure, it can be argued, is not dissimilar to our own personal narratives insofar as we cannot predict our futures, but we do invent and expect a certain future. We could argue that no one necessarily expects, or can expect, a sudden death: we expect that death and closure will occur at the appropriate time just as the plot of tick-tock is expected in realist fiction. Indeed, as will be discussed below, modern and postmodern fiction often foregrounds the “reality” of the absurdity of such human expectations; however, this does not dismiss our “real” desire to invent and expect appropriate endings.

From these descriptions of actions and happenings, we can begin to examine in much closer detail the specifically existential functional events of our personal narratives and fictional characters’ personal narratives, utilising the language used to describe fictional narratives, which, as I have argued, imitates our personal narratives. This examination will be the objective of the following three chapters, each of which will correspond to three basic “narrative blocks,” the beginning, the middle, and an end, respectively—a structure derived from Aristotle’s Poetics. This basic skeleton will be extended by drawing upon a variety of narrative terminologies, particularly those of Kermode and Chatman (whom we have already discussed). Based on this framework we will see how these narrative blocks correspond to the events of our personal narratives, and to the personal narratives of the characters of fiction, from which the shivering reader interprets and evaluates the meaning of the fictional Other’s lives. We will also see how these events are not only functional but thematic, insofar as they are permeated by existential themes such as in/authenticity, finitude, anxiety, freedom of choice,
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absurdity, and the predominance of the Other. Finally, we will see how it is not necessarily the reader who interprets the dead life of a character by actively reconstructing the character’s past, but the novelist who actively creates the character’s “interpretable” past, from which the reader “passively” interprets and evaluates. This is to say that the rhetoric of the novel tells the reader which events are necessary for creating the meaning of a character’s life.

Beginnings in Personal Narratives and Fiction

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A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which naturally has something else after it.

—Aristotle, Poetics

In his preface to Beginnings, Edward W. Said asks:

What is a beginning? What must one do in order to begin? What is special about beginning as an activity or a moment or a place? Can one begin whenever one pleases? What kind of attitude, or frame of mind is necessary for beginning? Historically, is there one sort of moment most propitious for beginning, one sort of individual for whom beginning is the most important of activities? For the work of literature, how important is the beginning? Are such questions about beginning worth raising? And if so, can they be treated or answered concretely, intelligibly, informatively?

Said asks these questions of both our understanding of our own lives—our own beginnings—and of the nature of beginnings in literature. Similarly, we can ask questions of what a beginning is in our meaningful, personal narratives, but, also, if we are to look to fiction to understand our personal narratives then we may ask what a beginning is in fiction. We may also ask what the importance of beginnings in fiction is for the interpretation and evaluation of the fictional Other's personal narratives,
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specifically in terms of both the beginnings of the personal narratives of the characters, and *discursive* beginnings—where the story of the character is “taken up.” And we can ask questions of the rhetoric of these beginnings: what is the novelist telling us when he or she chooses a particular beginning?

*Aristotle and the Tragic Plot*

To begin to answer these questions, we can look to Aristotle’s description of the tragic plot in *Poetics*. Aristotle describes the beginning and ending of the tragic plot as the first and last “incidents” of the plot, respectively:

> By a “beginning” I mean that which is itself not, by necessity, after anything else but after which something naturally is or develops. By an “end” I mean exactly the opposite: that which is naturally after something else, either necessarily or customarily, but after which there is nothing else. By a “middle” I mean that which is itself after something else and which has something else after it.¹

This definition does not suggest that a plot has any *specific* beginning or ending, only that a plot is *chronologically* ordered. As O. B. Hardison, Jr., states in his exegesis of *Poetics*, it is because of this extremely abstract description that a variety of interpretations have been made to explain the types of incidents that relate to the beginning and ending of a plot. One such example is that of Christian religious drama which took the beginning of a plot to be the beginning of time and the ending as the destruction of the world. But as Hardison states, “more self-conscious drama often solves the problem of beginning and ending by the human life span, or by social convention. Birth and death are obvious and natural points for the beginning and

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² Aristotle, *Poetics*, VII.
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However, this “cradle-to-grave” form of biographical narration was not preferable for Aristotle who complained that it produced a “false kind of unity” as “for in some of the many and infinitely varied things that happen to any one person, there is no unity. Thus, we must assert, there are many actions in the life of a single person from which no over-all unity of action emerges.” Aristotle adds that between some events in an individual’s life there is “no necessary or probable relation.” Thus, for Aristotle, the dramatist should omit from the narration of a character’s story his or her inauthentic, everyday activities, such as the daily routine of tasks and duties, as they bear no relation to the greater action of the plot or to the character’s actions. Indeed, Leopold Bloom’s detailed excursion to the “cuckstool” in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) would, in all likelihood, be omitted from the Aristotelian plot, as would Mrs. Ramsay’s task of knitting a brown stocking for the lighthouse-keeper’s son, in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Moreover, Aristotle claims that the dramatist should omit a character’s birth and death if they similarly bear no relation to the action. However, as has been described above, for our own personal narratives, the concepts of “unity” and “wholeness” are very much an existential necessity, and constitute the special kind of existence of human beings. Indeed, for Heidegger the existence of *Dasein* is marked by the wholeness that death brings, unifying birth and death, and one’s existence. Moreover, if meaningfulness is said to come from one’s *whole* life, not just one action or the last action (such as redemption of meaningfulness by suicide), then wholeness and unity are necessary for meaningfulness. As such, the humble biological event of our birth can be identified as the beginning of our personal narratives. Moreover, it can be seen as our proper “ontological” beginning insofar as it marks the beginning of our thrownness into existence.

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3 Hardison, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 139.
4 Ibid., 140.
5 Aristotle, *Poetics*, VIII.
6 Ibid.
However, for our individual personal narratives we can also identify a “second” beginning—a specifically “existential” beginning—of our personal narratives, which follows the initial beginning of our birth and can be said to begin our personal narratives proper. This beginning—this meaningful, self-determined future—is essentially the choice of our intentional, meaningful projects and also the beginning of the creation of the meaning of these projects. To again use Kermode’s analogy, this existential beginning is the tick that creates the anxious expectation of tock; it is the intention of a meaningful project of which the definitive meaning will be revealed in our future death.

But the designation of the humble-sounding tick to the meaningful choice of our existential beginning does not really reflect the significance of the existential beginning, nor does it reflect why there is a need to make such a significant choice in the first place. And, indeed, the making of the choice of a meaningful project is significant as it is marked by a significant change in the way we see ourselves and the way we view both our past and future selves. This change takes place before the need to choose which is to say that the actual making of the choice comes about only after the change. The moment of change can be described as a “decisive moment” in one’s life, or, to use the German word, the change can be described an Augenblick, which is translated as the “blink” or “twinkling of an eye,” or simply “moment.” In her book on the concept of the Augenblick, Koral Ward suggests that:

> In its most basic interpretation the Augenblick describes an experience of a fleeting but momentous event, an occurrence usually accompanied by an altered perception of time, either as condensed and swiftly passing or slow and drawn out. At its extreme, we might experience something like an arresting of time itself; an experience seems to stand out from time, though in actuality time moves on taking these moments with it. This itself is necessary to the moment: that it must pass.⁷

⁷ Ward, Augenblick, xi.
For Heidegger, the Augenblick is also a “moment of vision,” a “decisive moment,” which is more than an experience of a sudden event, the moment holds a change more far reaching than the next “now” moment of time, rather a radical turnabout from one “world” or view to another becomes possible.\(^9\)

The existential beginning is indeed a moment of vision and a decisive moment insofar as it is the moment in which we begin to see ourselves and our lives from a new vantage point—a new perspective. This is also very similar to Aristotle’s definition of anagnorisis which is translated as “recognition” or sometimes “discovery”\(^9\) and which is the middle incident in a complex tragic plot. Put simply, a recognition is a “change” in a character “from ignorance to knowledge.”\(^10\)

The Augenblick, as a moment of recognition, is the first “step” of our existential beginnings—a step which can be understood in a number of ways. The first is that it is the recognition that we are indeed “abandoned by God” and that there is no meaning to life in a world where “God is dead.” Because of the recognition of our abandonment, we may also “recognise” our anxiety stemming from our confrontation with the blank mystery of existence. We anxiously recognise that there is no answer to the question of the meaning of life. However, more positively, it is also the recognition of our freedom to create the subjective meaning of our lives, such that the first step of our existential beginning is very much a Nietzschean “heroic” beginning, described in the

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\(^9\) Ibid., 103.
\(^9\) Hardison, Aristotle’s Poetics, n165.
\(^10\) Ibid., 168. Hardison further suggests that recognition can be interpreted in a number of ways but denies that “self-knowledge” is a form of recognition. However, Hardison also claims that, “theoretically,” self-knowledge, as a form of change from ignorance to knowledge, could be a form of recognition, though not in Aristotle’s definition of a complex plot: “If ‘self-knowledge’ or ‘perception’ were the only requirement, a recognition scene could form the final incident in a simple plot. But . . . the presence of a recognition scene makes a plot, by definition, complex. This is only possible if the recognition occurs in the ‘middle’ section of the play as the result of one sequence of incidents and is followed by at least one other incident defining a new sequence. After the recognition, the plot must ‘veer off in a new direction.’” Hardison, Aristotle’s Poetics, 169. This understanding of recognition will also be discussed in the following chapter.
“Introduction” above. This is to say that our personal narratives begin when we each begin to view ourselves as heroes and see that we are free to create our own individual meaning. Accompanying this is the recognition that only we, ourselves, are “concerned” for the meaning of our own life; that our individual life’s meaning is of concern as it specifically relates to us individually. This form of recognition is significant particularly in terms of the relation between Heidegger’s descriptions of authenticity and the “they.” Put simply, we existentially “begin” when we authentically wrench ourselves from the inauthenticity of the “they.” In saying this, what must be noted is that, unlike the inauthenticity of Dasein’s attitude towards death (discussed in chapter two above), here we are talking about the “inauthenticity of choice.” John Macquarrie proffers a general summary of the relationship between authenticity and choice:

Existence is authentic to the extent that the existent has taken possession of himself and, shall we say, has moulded himself in his own image. Inauthentic existence, on the other hand, is moulded by external influences, whether these be circumstances, moral codes, political or ecclesiastical authorities, or whatever.¹¹

What Macquarrie’s description suggests is that we are inauthentic when we are “moulded by the ‘they,’” and moulded by their interpretations of the self and the world; we are inauthentic when we allow the “they” to influence or sway our decision-making. Contrastingly, Heidegger states that we are authentic when the “conscience summons Dasein’s Self from its lostness in the ‘they.’”¹² Heidegger adds:

The Self of everyday Dasein is the they-self, which we distinguish from the authentic Self—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way. As they-self, the particular Dasein has been dispersed into the “they,” and must first find itself.¹³

¹¹ Macquarrie, Existentialism, 206.
¹² Heidegger, Being and Time, 274H.
¹³ Ibid., 129H.
Thus, we can say that the first step of the beginning of our personal narrative is also our individual conscience summoning us from our inauthenticity to authenticity, such that we determine our own individual possibilities of meaning and not the “they's” determination. Put this way, we find that our authentic summoning of the conscience is somewhat similar to Nietzsche’s claim that we need to remove our selves from the foreground of our lives and see ourselves from a distance. In terms of the creation of the meaning of our lives, the “foreground” is our state of inauthenticity from which we need to summon ourselves, see the bigger picture, and authentically see the heroes that we must become. This change is very much reflective of the culmination of our formative years where, as an adult, we begin to make own meaningful choices. But there is also a change in our agency; a change which can be further explained if we again look at Chatman’s description of actions and happenings. In his example of Peter being caught in a storm, Chatman describes how the storm happens to Peter such that Peter is the affected not the effector. The storm is an external force affecting Peter as if he were merely an object. As I have argued, Peter is still free to choose how he will act in the face of the storm, even if it seems that he is not free. A similar situation can be said of our formative years as we lack a certain sense of individual freedom because of the predominance of the Other (such as our parents). As such, we are the affected and it is the Other that is the effector. Like Peter, we are free but we do not necessarily act freely. In adulthood, however, we become the effectors. This change in agency of the child, and the nature of “choice,” is also discussed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle claims that children do not make choices at all, let alone a choice with the weight of an existential choice: “For both children and the lower animals share in voluntary action, but not in choice, and acts done on the spur of the moment we describe as voluntary, but not as chosen.”

For Aristotle, children’s characters are “only just forming and their deliberations are usually, or often, not their own, but somebody else's. As they grow up, so, more and more, they make choices for

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themselves—true choices.”

Thus, in Aristotle’s terms, an existential beginning is the adult’s making of a true choice: the “true” beginning of our personal narratives is the shift from being merely the central character of our lives to its true, Nietzschean hero, where we choose our meaningful personal narratives with a new-found sense of adult, existential freedom. This, I believe, answers another of the questions posed by Said on the problem of describing what a “beginning” is: “Is the beginning of a given work its real beginning, or is there some other, secret point that more authentically starts the work off?”

I would argue that the real beginning of our stories is an “adult” existential beginning, and an “authentic” beginning in both senses of the word.

From this description we can thus summarise the first step of our “existential” beginning as an authentic, anxious realisation of our freedom to choose and create our meaningful personal narratives. The second step, however, is the making of the choice of our meaningful projects—the tick of our personal narrative—and the recognition of the range of choices. A description of the nature of choice can be derived from Chatman’s description of a kernel event of a narrative, which he states is one of two hierarchal types of narrative event, the other being a satellite event:

Kernels are narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events. They are nodes or hinges in the structure, branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths. Achilles can give up his girl or refuse; Huck Finn can remain at home or set off down the river; Lambert Strether can advise Chad to remain in Paris or to return; Miss Emily can pay the taxes or send the collector packing; and so on. Kernels cannot be deleted without destroying the narrative logic. In the classical narrative text, proper interpretation of events at any given point is a function of the ability to follow these ongoing selections, to see later kernels as consequences of earlier.

A minor plot event—a satellite—is not crucial in this sense. It can be deleted without disturbing the logic of the plot, though its omission will, of course, impoverish the narrative aesthetically. Satellites entail no choice, but are solely the workings-out of the

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16 Said, Beginnings, 3.
choices made at the kernels. They necessarily imply the existence of kernels, but not vice-versa. Their function is that of filling in, elaborating, completing the kernel; they form the flesh on the skeleton.\textsuperscript{17}

Although Chatman does not say that kernel events are choices, his examples indicate that a crux in a story is an event which is determined by choice. Therefore, we can say that kernel events encompass the range of movements and possible paths—our choices and projects—of our personal narratives. They are the major choices of our personal narratives and are essential to the narrative structure. In contrast, Chatman argues that satellite events are not crucial to the narrative structure, and involve no choice—they are the workings out of the choices of the kernels. However, as was argued in the previous chapter, our choices essentially constitute all the events of our personal narratives; therefore, the argument could be made that both kernels and satellites are choices: the kernel events represent major choices for major projects, whereas satellite events represent minor choices for minor projects which are essential for the “workings-out” of the major projects.

Of course, our existential beginnings are not defined by the possibility that we see that we are free to choose, and that we see that there are choices, but that we do choose and, most importantly, do begin to act upon our intended choices—the third step of our existential beginnings. Indeed, choice without action is essentially empty and meaningless as it does not “begin” the creation of meaning—it is merely a possibility which fades just as quickly as the utterance of our choice ceases to echo. Indeed, the act of creating meaning can also be described as the “movement” that follows our intended choices. As Said describes:

\textsuperscript{17} Chatman, \textit{Story and Discourse}, 53–54. This description is of course very similar to Roland Barthes’ earlier description of cardinal functions (kernels) and catalysts (satellites). Barthes uses the example of a telephone ringing to explain: “It is equally possible to answer or not answer, two acts which will unfailingly carry the narrative along different paths. Between two cardinal functions however, it is always possible to set out subsidiary notations which cluster around one or other nucleus without modifying its alternative nature: the space separating \textit{the telephone rang} from \textit{Bond answered} can be saturated with a host of trivial incidents or descriptions—\textit{Bond moved towards the desk, picked up one of the receivers, put down his cigarette}, etc. These catalysts are still functional, insofar as they enter into correlation with a nucleus, but their
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To identify a beginning—particularly that of a historical movement or a realm of thought—with an individual is of course an act of historical understanding. More than that, however, it is what may be called an intentional act—that is, an act in which designating individual X as founder of continuity Y (a movement, say) implies that X has value in having intended Y.¹⁸

To use Said’s terms, an individual or, indeed, a character in a novel has “value”—he or she has a meaningful life—only insofar as they intend their project and act in such a way that the project “moves” and becomes realised. Moreover, only when this first kernel event is “settled” can the beginning come to an “end” and the creation and shaping of the meaning—“the middle”—of our stories begin.

From this description we can draw a basic functional model of the beginnings of our personal narratives, illustrated in figure 1, below. The horizontal line is a chronological time-line of our existence, moving left to right from the vertical line representing the boundary of our birth (B), to the vertical line representing the boundary of death (D). The dashed vertical line (E) is a pseudo-boundary representing the kernel event of our lives—the existential beginning of our personal narratives (the less essential satellite events have been omitted). The oblique lines stemming from the horizontal line at E represent several possible choices which are not chosen. The horizontal line is the chosen choice.

Figure 1: Basic personal narrative picture. This figure has been adapted from Chatman’s narrative diagram in Story and Discourse, 54.

¹⁸ Functionality is attenuated, unilateral, parasitic.” Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative,” 93–94.
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Beginnings and Fiction

From this summary of the beginnings of our own personal narratives, we can now turn to the beginnings of fictional characters. In doing so it becomes immediately apparent that there is a significant disparity between the world of fiction and the world of reality: unlike our own individual personal narratives, a character in a novel can be shown to have three beginnings: a biological beginning, or the event of the character’s birth (B); an existential beginning, where the heroic beginning of a character is represented within the story of the novel’s discourse (E); and a discursive beginning (a), where the narration of a character’s story begins—the moment in time, which, for most realist fiction, is essentially when the linear NOW-story (the story that begins at the story-NOW—the moment the action began to transpire) is taken-up by the narrator. These three beginnings provide for at least three broad narrative combinations: the first is that the NOW-story begins before an identifiable existential beginning; the second combination is that the NOW-story begins at the character’s existential beginning; and the third combination is that the NOW-story begins after the character’s first existential beginning, and often focuses on a second (or third etc.) existential beginning. We will examine a number of examples which exemplify these combinations, but in doing so we will also consider the broad historical trends of these combinations, the rhetoric of these beginnings, and how these beginnings influence the interpretation and evaluation of a character. Moreover, we will examine the various ways in which the characters are introduced into the text and how, when, and by whom the characters are named. As will be illustrated in several of the examples below, the process of naming a character (be it by an autobiographical narrator or a third-person narrator) has a significant effect on how the character is evaluated.

18 Said, Beginnings, 32.
1. Biological and Discursive Beginnings

Although Aristotle did not prefer the events of birth and death as the respective beginnings and endings of a narrative, it was very much a convention of the early realist novelists who modelled the novel form on the autobiographical memoir such that the character’s biological beginning (B) or, more specifically, the character’s early, “formative years” coincided with the novel’s discursive beginning (a)—the beginning of the story-NOW—or the moment when the autobiographical narrator begins to recount his or her preterite story after the “darkness” of birth (illustrated in figure 2 below where the discursive beginning (a) is the bold-set vertical line).

\[ \text{a and B} \quad \text{E} \]

Figure 2: Coinciding of character’s biological beginning and beginning of novel’s story.

The coinciding of a character’s biological beginning with the discursive beginning of the story provides a simple and pragmatic start for both the autobiographical narrator and the novelist behind the fictional narrator: it gives the narrator a firm boundary, a cornerstone, from which he or she can tell their story; similarly, for novelists, a biological beginning serves the dual purpose of bringing their characters into existence as discourse (a pragmatic time to start the character’s story), and existence as “real” human beings.
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What is more, by beginning the story of a novel with a character’s biological beginning, it enables the novelist to detail the formative years of the character’s existence—his or her childhood—which is often considered to be the most important period of a “real” autobiographer’s life. It shows the evolution of a character from childhood to adulthood. This beginning is essentially the more encompassing focus of the *Bildungsroman*—variously described as the “novel of formation,” “of initiation,” “of education.”

In *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti describes how the *Bildungsroman* centres on the movement away from youth to maturity and to the formation of the ego. It is also symbolic of the essence and meaning of life in the modern world:

> Youth, or rather the European novel’s numerous versions of youth, becomes for our modern culture the age which holds the “meaning of life”... Youth is, so to speak, modernity’s “essence,” the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past.

From this description we can thus understand “youth” as the beginning of self-determination and the creation of meaning—a meaning which can be found only by looking and projecting forwards. The inclusion of a character’s formative years is especially significant if we consider that it does well to illuminate the character’s existential beginning, the moment of change when the character begins to take hold of his or her own adult life, and where the character first chooses his or her own meaningful project. In narrative terms, the existential beginning is the first proper kernel event of the story which follows the discursive and biological beginning and the character’s formative years.

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20 Moretti describes how he believes that there are no Freudian interpretations of the novel and no solid Freudian analysis of youth. The reason for this is that “the *raison d’être* of psychoanalysis lies in *breaking up* the psyche into its opposing ‘forces’—whereas youth and the novel have the opposite task of fusing, or at least bringing together, the conflicting features of individual personality.” Moretti, *The Way of the World*, 10–11.
The story of Jane in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) exemplifies this first combination of beginnings. Jane is an orphan, having both her mother and father die of typhus fever. She was subsequently taken in by her Aunt Reed whose deceased husband was the brother of Jane’s mother. Jane’s childhood is spent initially at the Reeds’ home of Gateshead, in which she is treated very cruelly by her inherited family, before, at the age of ten, being sent to the Lowood charity school, where Jane lives under the dominance of Mr. Brocklehurst. It is this event—her moving to Lowood—which is the locus for the beginning of the narration of her autobiographical story—the beginning of the NOW-story. More specifically, the first four chapters (the first narrative block) of the discourse are concerned with only a few months of her life at Gateshead, and the following five chapters (the second narrative block) are concerned with her first few months at Lowood. It is because of this focus on her move to Lowood that we can interpret it as being a significant event in Jane’s life. It can also be described as a kernel event insofar as it appears as a crux in her story and separates the two narrative blocks symbolised by the two places in which she has lived. However, what must be noted is that the event of Jane going to Lowood is an event that *happens* to Jane: she does not choose to go to Lowood—she is forced to go there by her Aunt Reed, and the then ten-year-old Jane has no say in the matter. Indeed, her being sent to Lowood may even be interpreted as *not* being a kernel event of her story as it is not an event where a choice is made by Jane—the character that “moves” the story. This is to say that the events of her first ten years of life happen to Jane and her move to Lowood is almost indistinguishable from the “mode” of existence—her *affected* existence—at Gateshead. Her move to Lowood is not a crux in her life but an undisturbed trajectory. And this trajectory remains undisturbed for the following eight years at Lowood, as is explicitly
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indicated by Jane herself when, at the beginning of the tenth chapter, she tells the reader:

Hitherto I have recorded in detail the events of my insignificant existence: to the first ten years of my life, I have given almost as many chapters. But this is not to be a regular autobiography: I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest; therefore I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connection.²²

What we notice in this passage is that Jane explicitly acknowledges the insignificance and, it can be said, the meaninglessness of her first ten years at Gateshead, but also the meaninglessness of the following eight years she spends at Lowood. It can be inferred that Jane believes that this period at Lowood is of no interest to the reader but also that this period bears little significance on the unfolding of her story, for understanding the meaning of her story, or, indeed, for evaluating the meaning of her life. In this combined period of eighteen years, Jane asks no questions of her life or its meaning, and her life appears to be very much an inauthentic existence. It is only when her teacher, Miss Temple, marries and decides to move on with her husband, that Jane has an awakening of sorts, and has what would appear to be an authentic, existential beginning:

I walked about the chamber most of the time. I imagined myself only to be regretting my loss, and thinking how to repair it; but when my reflections were concluded, and I looked up and found that the afternoon was gone, and evening far advanced, another discovery dawned on me: namely, that in the interval I had undergone a transforming process; that my mind had put off all it had borrowed of Miss Temple—or rather that she had taken with her the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity—and that now I was left in my natural element; and beginning to feel the stirring of old emotions. It did not seem as if a prop were withdrawn, but rather as if a motive were gone: it was not the power to be

²² Brontë, Jane Eyre, 97.
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tranquil which had failed me, but the reason for tranquillity was no more. My world had for some years been in Lowood: my experience had been of its rules and systems; now I remembered that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils.²³

Miss Temple can be said to have provided Jane with a safe ground beneath her feet—a tranquilising everydayness—which (whilst not abject in any way) also suppressed any need for her to choose a life—a meaningful project—for herself. Miss Temple’s leaving thrusts the eighteen-year-old Jane into the role of an adult. And as an adult she must choose for herself and must look towards a new future for herself:

And now I felt that it was not enough: I tired of the routine of eight years in one afternoon. I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication; for change, stimulus: that petition, too, seemed swept off into vague space; “Then,” I cried, half desperate, “grant me at least a new servitude!”²⁴

Jane sees that her past is, in hindsight, meaningless—it is a meaningless chapter of her personal narrative, preceding its true existential beginning, as is evidenced by her “tiring” of eights years in one afternoon. For the first time, Jane chooses a life for herself as a free adult: her formative years have ended and her new adult life begins. But what is also interesting is that when Jane chooses a meaning for herself, she also chooses a meaning within the confines of her facticity reflecting Moretti’s description of the Bildungsroman as the novel of modern self-determination and individuality but also of socialisation—the cultural tendency towards normality and to adhere to social norms.²⁵ Indeed, Jane’s facticity has thus far held her back—she is an orphan of low

²³ Ibid., 98–99.
²⁴ Ibid., 99.
socio-economic status, and, therefore, cannot aspire for much more. But, here, she chooses a meaning within her facticity. As Jane declares:

“But Servitude! That must be matter of fact. Any one may serve: I have served here eight years; now all I want is to serve elsewhere. Can I not get so much of my own will? Is not the thing feasible? Yes—yes—the end is not so difficult; if I had only a brain active enough to ferret out the means of attaining it.”

And so Jane chooses “a new servitude.” She is still bound to serve, but at least it is a servitude of her own choice. More importantly for her meaningful story is that Jane does choose and does act, firstly with her advertising of her services as a teacher, and secondly by accepting the offer of the position of governess at Thornfield—the home of Mr. Rochester. And it is because of Jane’s acceptance of this position that her life truly begins, a new beginning acknowledged by Jane herself: “A phase of my life was closing to-night, a new one opening to-morrow”; and “I mounted the vehicle which was to bear me to new duties and a new life in the unknown environs of Millcote.”

Jane recognises that her new beginning is to play a significant part in the shaping of her life. What must also be noted is that Jane’s choice of a new servitude as a governess, instils her with a new sense of heroic freedom and individualism. Indeed, the freedom and individualism continues throughout her story as is evidenced when, in the novel’s concluding chapter, she famously states: “Reader, I married him.” Jane does not say that “he married me,” or that “we were married,” but that she married him. From this choice of words, Jane suggests that she chose to marry Rochester as a free individual, such that she is not his servant, and that she is, and has always been, free to choose what will become of her life, and free to create her life’s meaning. Her existential beginning is thus a beginning which influences the remainder of her life, creating a proper boundary to her personal narrative.

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26 Brontë, Jane Eyre, 100.
27 Ibid., 104.
28 Ibid., 107.
The story of Jane Eyre is a pertinent example of an existential beginning; however, it is also a pertinent example in terms of the historical development of both the novel and its characters, as it both connects and separates itself from the picaresque novels and the early realist novels from which it owes its lineage. More specifically, whilst sharing such formal similarities as autobiographical narration and similarities in character with these earlier novels, the character of Jane Eyre has a far more significant and identifiable existential beginning than earlier characters, and there is also a stronger sense of agency in her character. This claim can be best illustrated by contrasting the character of Jane Eyre with two earlier characters: Lázaro from the anonymous picaresque novel *Lazarillo De Tormes* (1554) and Moll Flanders from Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722). The three characters of these respective novels do share several commonalities such as having been orphaned at a very young age and having been born into servitude; however, the two characters of the earlier novels differ markedly from the character of Jane Eyre insofar as there is almost no change in the agency of the earlier characters, and there is almost no identifiable existential beginning.

*Lázaro*

*Lazarillo De Tormes* provides the starkest contrast with *Jane Eyre*, specifically in terms of the agency of the two novels’ respective characters and in terms of an identifiable existential beginning. *Lazarillo* is the autobiographical story of a young boy, Lázaro, who comes to live with, and be the servant of, various masters, to which each chapter of *Lazarillo De Tormes* is dedicated. Commonly, *picaro* characters lack the freedom to choose what their lives will be; as such the events of their lives, and the events of their discoursed stories, are *happenings* in which they are the patient. The *picaro* is the affected, not the effector in his or her own story, just as Jane Eyre, for the first eighteen

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29 Ibid., 498.
Lázaro begins his story with his recollections of the first significant event of his young life, when, at the age of eight years old, his mother allows a blind man to take Lázaro so that he may act as a servant and guide to his new master:

Round about then a blind man came to stay at the inn. Now he thought I would be the right kind of lad to set his feet straight on the road, and so he asked my mother to let him take me. She said that she would put me in his charge.\textsuperscript{30}

Despite his mother’s entreaties to the blind man that he treat the young, orphaned Lázaro with care, the blind man instead treats Lázaro very cruelly and, consequently, Lázaro chooses to leave. Here Lázaro’s choice is not so much an act of free will, like Jane Eyre’s choice to leave Lowood, or as a choice of a meaningful project, but an act of necessity. Indeed, his leaving of the blind man leads to him meeting his next master, a priest, such that his servitude is maintained. This chance meeting with the priest not only signifies the beginning of the second chapter of the novel, but is also identifiable as the second narrative event of Lázaro’s story:

When I went up to him to beg for a few coppers he asked me if I knew how to serve at Mass. I said I did, which was true because the blind man had taught me hundreds of things, even though he did treat me badly, and this was one of them. So the priest took me on as his servant.\textsuperscript{31}

These first two chapters of \textit{Lazarillo De Tormes} illustrate how life happens to the young Lázaro, a theme which is continued over the next four chapters/episodes. He serves others not by choice but by force. But, of course, Lázaro is essentially a child and

\textsuperscript{30} Anon., \textit{Lazarillo De Tormes}, 27.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 38.
therefore can be forgiven for not making his own true choices. He is recounting his formative years in which his sense of agency and freedom is assumedly being fostered such that he would eventually take control of his own life and become its hero. However, this change does not come to pass: in the seventh and final chapter of his story, Lázaro is of adult age, and yet his agency does not really differ from that of the previous chapters when he was a youth; indeed, even as an adult, Lázaro is still the servant of others and is the patient of happenings. This is evidenced when Lázaro describes his “arranged” marriage:

Soon after I got the job, the Archpriest of St Salvador’s heard about me and saw how sharp and ready-witted I was, because I used to announce that his wines were for sale. So he arranged a marriage for me with a maid of his. I saw that only advantages and good could come from being associated with the reverend gentleman, my lord, and Your Honour’s servant and friend, so I decided to marry the girl.\textsuperscript{32}

Lázaro’s final and only choice is whether or not to marry the girl; but his decision is an empty and meaningless one as it has effectively been decided for him. Lázaro does not have what can be described as an existential beginning: he may be telling his story but he is not its hero in a Nietzschean sense. He is not the hero of his story in the way that Jane Eyre is the hero of her story. And unlike Jane Eyre’s story, Lázaro’s lacks any form of a personal narrative: it is a meaningless series of “and then’s”\textsuperscript{33} which generally focuses on the acquisition of food. To again use Kermode’s terms, the story of Lázaro does not distinguish between \textit{chronos}—“the passing of time”—and \textit{kairos}—where a point in time is “charged with past and future”; “charged with a meaning derived from its relation to an end.”\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 77–78.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} This is a phrase derived from Julian Young in his description of what a meaningless life may feel like: “Perhaps . . . when one complains that one’s life is meaningless, what one is complaining about is the lack of a story. If I look back on my past, all I see is a series of episodes connected by nothing more than ‘and then’s’ (\textit{sic})—I was born, and then I went to school, and then I became a loving wife and mother, and then the kids left home, and then . . .” Young, \textit{The Death of God}, 85–86.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Kermode, \textit{The Sense of an Ending}, 46–47.
\end{itemize}
Moll Flanders

The story of Lázaro is very similar to our second example—the story of Moll Flanders in Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*. Indeed, the story of Moll Flanders can be said to be more like the story of Lázaro than that of Jane Eyre despite *Jane Eyre* and *Moll Flanders* being generally grouped within the genre of the realist novel. The reason for this is that the earliest examples of the new genre of the realist novel were still very much picaresque in the sense that the kind of narrative events that constitute the character’s story were predominantly influenced by exterior forces. Indeed, Moll Flanders shares many characteristics with the *picaro* character as Moll is a character of low birth and her deceitful actions, similar to those of the *picaro*. However, as Ian Watt claims, Moll Flanders differentiates herself from the *picaro* insofar as “the feeling evoked by [her actions] is of a much more complete sympathy and identification: author and reader alike cannot but take her and her problems much more seriously.”  

This description would place Moll Flanders in the same category as Jane Eyre as Jane similarly evokes sympathy and identification; however, this claim notwithstanding, it can be argued that Moll is still very much a picaresque character insofar as she does not illustrate a causal or active development, which would seemingly stem from an existential beginning. Moll Flanders does not choose to act with her own sense of freedom in the way that Jane Eyre acts. There is, however, an event within her autobiographical story which has the appearance of an existential beginning and the intention of a meaningful project. This event occurs when Moll is still very much a child, when at the age of eight years old she is crying to her mistress about the prospect of “going into service”—of going to be a servant—claiming that she “can’t work house-work.” The mistress endeavours to calm her by saying that she need not go yet. But this does not calm Moll, which, consequently, angers the mistress:

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When she saw that I was not pacify’d yet, she began to be angry with me; and what wou’d you have? says she, don’t I tell you that you shall not go to Service till you are bigger? Ay, says I, but then I must go at last; why, what? said she, is the Girl mad? what, would you be a Gentlewoman? Yes says I, and cry’d heartily, till I roar’d out again.\textsuperscript{36}

Moll wants to become a Gentlewoman, which can be described as Moll’s wish “to become self-sufficient, to be her own ‘economic’ system as it were.”\textsuperscript{37} However, what must be noted in this description is that Moll does not say that becoming a Gentlewoman is her individual meaningful project, her goal: it is her mistress who proposes it, to which Moll innocently agrees. It is only an implied choice. Indeed, no such mention of becoming a Gentlewoman is made by Moll in the discourse prior to this particular incident—her choice is simply not to do house work. However, Moll maintains the desire of becoming a Gentlewoman for several years, until, at the age of fourteen, she encounters several “misfortunes,” and consequently, on the “spur of the moment,” changes her mind:

The fright of my Condition had made such an Impression upon me, that I did not want now to be a Gentlewoman, but was very willing to be a Servant, and that any kind of Servant they thought fit to have me be.\textsuperscript{38}

Moll’s new “project” is to become “a servant to many masters,” much like the lot of Lázaro. Again, it would seem that this choice is representative of an existential beginning as Moll chooses for herself; however, the narrative does not develop this possibility with any conviction in the same way that Jane Eyre’s existential beginning is developed. It is not projected as a future possibility, such that the reader can see that Moll is becoming who she is. Thus, it is an empty and meaningless choice. However, it can be said that Moll does have another meaningful project, namely the pursuit of

\textsuperscript{36} Defoe, \textit{Moll Flanders}, 47–48.
money and wealth. As Watt describes, this kind of “project” was typical of the characters of early realist novels:

All Defoe’s heroes pursue money, which he characteristically called “the general dominating article in the world”; and they pursue it very methodically according to the profit and loss book-keeping which Max Weber considered to be the distinctive technical feature of modern capitalism. Defoe’s heroes, we observe, have no need to learn this technique; whatever the circumstances of their birth and education, they have it in their blood, and keep us more fully informed of their present stocks of money and commodities than any other characters in fiction.\textsuperscript{39}

Watt claims that this was a common goal for all of Defoe’s heroes who each pursued money, embodying the rise of economic individualism in the modern capitalist world.\textsuperscript{40} But if “pursuing money” were a project of any substance, it fails only insofar as it a project that is completed over and over again: Moll Flanders lives her life in a hand-to-mouth fashion, where little to no thought of a future beyond the next acquisition of money is considered. Thus, Moll’s life, like Lázaro’s life and his endless quest for food, is reduced to a series of meaningless “and thens.” Indeed, like the picaresque tales, \textit{Moll Flanders} is an episodic plot which, as Watt describes, “[denies] Defoe the advantages of a structure which will give coherence and larger implication to the thoughts and acts of his characters.”\textsuperscript{41} This implication is that of a posited future based on an individual, authentic choice and action, stemming from an existential beginning.

Of course, it can be argued that Moll Flanders does achieve her goal of gaining wealth when she eventually inherits a plantation from her mother, and, as the subtitle of the novel reads, finally “grew rich”; however, this goal is achieved not by Moll’s own hands or from her own choices—Moll, herself, attributes this acquisition to the “Hand of

\textsuperscript{37} Sieber, \textit{The Picaresque}, 54.
\textsuperscript{38} Defoe, \textit{Moll Flanders}, 54–55.
\textsuperscript{39} Watt, \textit{The Rise of the Novel}, 63.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 108.
As such, this event can only be described as another “happening,” where Moll is the patient and not the agent of the event. Indeed, owing to the fact that only a few pages remain before the end of the novel, Moll’s good fortune appears to be more of a functional and satisfactory conclusion to a novel on behalf of its author than a satisfactory conclusion to a more-or-less meaningless life.

### 2. Existential and Discursive Beginnings

*Jane Eyre, Lazarillo De Tormes, and Moll Flanders* are all examples of novels which employ the first combination of beginnings in fiction: the coinciding of the novel’s discursive beginning and the novel’s character’s biological beginning. This combination enables the narrator/novelist to detail the formative years of a character and ideally contrast these formative years with the character’s existential beginning. However, a second possible combination of the three beginnings in fiction is the coinciding of an existential and discursive beginning where the NOW-story (a) essentially omits the character’s biological beginning and formative years (B) and begins at the character’s “first” existential beginning (E)—the crux of when the character’s formative years are concluding and his or her adulthood (and their ability to make “true” choices) begins (as illustrated in figure 3, below).

![Figure 3: Coinciding of character's existential beginning and beginning of novel's story.](image)

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To begin at a character’s existential beginning or, as will be discussed below, after an existential beginning is a significant choice to make on behalf of the novelist because it suggests that the character’s past—the character’s formative years—is less important, if at all important, to the meaningful story. The character in the novel does have a “past,” which began with his or her biological beginning, but this past can be represented as a stasis statement which rhetorically states that the past is not altogether meaningless, but can be summarised without disrupting or affecting the story. Chatman claims that the stasis statement is one of two kinds of statements in the novel’s discourse, the other being a process statement:

The discourse is said to “state” the story, and these statements are of two kinds—process and stasis—according to whether someone did something or something happened; or whether something simply existed in the story. Process statements are in the mode of DO or HAPPEN, not as actual words in English or any natural language (these form the substance of the expression), but as more abstract expressional categories. . . . Stasis statements are in the mode of IS.

Chatman suggests that a stasis statement may communicate either or both of two aspects: a character’s identity or the character’s qualities, such as the character’s traits. However, it can be argued that the stasis statement can also represent a summary of the character’s past choices (or lack thereof) and past actions. More specifically, the stasis statement enables the novelist to summarise the overall

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43 This description of the stasis statement is very much related to Aristotle’s definition of the beginning of a plot as “the incident that initiates the process of change.” Hardison suggests that this change is the disruption of a “stable situation”: “Although life is never stable, societies and individuals tend to seek stability. It often happens that after a period of relative equilibrium something happens to upset the balance, and that later, after the disrupting factor has worked itself out, a new stability, more or less satisfactory than the former one, is achieved.” Hardison, Aristotle’s Poetics, 140. This stable situation or period of equilibrium happens before the plot begins, such that the first incident begins the disruption of this stability.

44 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 31–32.

45 Ibid., 32. Of course, not all traits necessarily change, and those that do may not change immediately, but continue for some time into the story. This is to say that a character may be at
meaningfulness or meaninglessness of a character’s past choices and past actions.

Hochman elaborates on this concept:

“The embodied presence of the characters as glimpsed even at their first appearance implicitly contains—as a first glimpse of a person in life may do, though perhaps less vividly—the whole process of their development. We are ordinarily impelled to intuit this development, without much specification of detail, on the basis of the experiences we see the characters undergo in the course of the work. We assume that the experiences, responses, and conflicts that they have in the present action epitomise their characteristic modes of experience at all times and that the structure of values and choices which makes them what they are in the present reflects what they were in the past.”

This choice to omit a character’s past by summarising his or her past as a stasis statement is exemplified by the coinciding of the beginning of the discourse of the novel with the existential beginning of its character: this choice enables the novelist to omit the character’s formative years, such that the meaningful segment of the character’s life—his or her adult life—becomes the main, “meaningful” action and the beginning of their meaningful personal narrative.

This very much relates to Said’s claim that the beginning “is the first step in the intentional production of meaning.” Similarly, the production of meaning is reflected in the coinciding of the character’s NOW-story with the intention of the character’s meaningful project. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the character’s past is meaningless; however, the choice to omit the character’s past rhetorically implies that the character’s past is unnecessary for making sense of the story or the character’s meaning. This is also significant if, for example,

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first described as “static,” and may continue to be static until some unforeseen incident disrupts this stasis.

46 Hochman, Character in Literature, 148.

47 The novelist’s omission of a character’s past reflects his or her authority of “selection”—one of the many choices made by the novelist over the various aspects of a discourse. As Chatman describes: “[Selection] is the capacity of any discourse to choose which events and objects actually to state and which only to imply. For example, in the ‘complete’ account, never given in all its detail, the ‘ultimate argument,’ or logos, each character obviously must first be born. But the discourse need not mention his birth, may elect to take up his history at the age of ten or twenty-five or fifty or whenever suits its purpose.” Chatman, Story and Discourse, 28.
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we consider that the novelist’s choice to omit the formative years of his or her characters is rhetorically telling us that this past should not influence how the character is interpreted and evaluated. Indeed, if a child makes no “true” choices, then the child cannot be judged on the choices he or she does make.

Stan Parker

This description of the implied meaninglessness of a character’s past life by its omission from the discourse is exemplified by the story of Stan Parker in Patrick White’s The Tree of Man (1955). The Tree of Man is a significant example not only because of where the NOW-story begins but because of how Stan Parker’s existential beginning is represented: White uses strong symbolic language to emphasise Stan’s beginning. Stan’s existential beginning—his Augenblick—is the first narrative block of the story and represents a crux in Stan’s life: his formative years have ended and his adulthood is beginning. What is significant about beginning at this crux is that where Jane Eyre dedicates a hundred-odd pages to the narration of her formative years—before the true choice of her existential beginning—the third-person narrator of The Tree of Man summarises Stan’s formative years and his existential beginning within the minimal space of some fifteen pages. As such, the main discourse of The Tree of Man is centred on the adulthood of Stan’s life—his life after his formative years.

The beginning of the discourse of The Tree of Man, and the narrative block of the existential beginning, begins the NOW-story. The narrator begins by telling us of a young man, Stan, and his dog arriving at an untended piece of land in the early twentieth-century Australian outback, which Stan has inherited from his mother and father. Stan is at first unnamed, which can be recognised as external focalisation, which Gérard Genette describes as a narrative technique where “the hero is described

48 Said, Beginnings, 5.
and followed for a long time as an unknown person whose identity is problematic."  

The “problem” of Stan’s identity is gradually unfolded and we see that it is essentially the problem of making meaning of his own, individual life. At first, the young man’s actions are mechanical, voiceless, and impersonal, until he takes his axe to a tree:

The man took an axe and struck at the side of a hairy tree, more to hear the sound than for any other reason. And the sound was cold and loud. The man struck at the tree, and struck, till several white chips had fallen. He looked at the scar in the side of the tree. The silence was immense. It was the first time anything like this had happened in that part of the bush.

The striking of the axe upon the tree breaks the silence of the bush; but it also symbolises the breaking of the silence of his indistinguishable identity, and, as we later discover, the breaking of the silence of the man’s somewhat inauthentic life. The sound of the axe striking the tree is new and unlike anything that had been heard before in this part of the bush, but also new and unlike anything that had been heard from the young man himself. The man is tentatively testing his freedom and is finding voice. There is a sense of “becoming” in the man; indeed, as the third-person narrator explicitly states: “The man was a young man. Life had not yet operated on his face.”

The man’s face, and the piece of land on which he has found himself, have not been worked upon by life or humankind, respectively. The land has not been fashioned into, or imbibed with, a sense of place, just as the young man has not found himself, and given character or individuality to his face, his identity, or his meaningful life.

The narrator proceeds to describe more sounds produced by the man which intermingle with the surrounding bush: “There was the sound of tin plate, tea on tin, the dead thump of flour. Somewhere water ran. Birds babbled, settling themselves on a

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49 Genette, Narrative Discourse, 190–91.
50 White, The Tree of Man, 9.
51 Ibid.
Only at this moment is the young man given a name: Stan Parker. And it is at this moment that the narrator recalls, through a flashback sequence, the beginning of Stan’s story, telling the reader of how Stan got his name, and some details of his mother and father. The narrator also tells the reader of the desires that Stan’s mother has for him:

“Stan,” said his mother once, “you must promise to love God, and never to touch a drop.”

“Yes,” said the boy, for he had had experience of neither, and the sun was in his eyes.

Stan’s mother’s aspirations were that he become a preacher or a teacher: “He will teach the words of the poets and God. With her respect for these, she suspected, in all twilight and good faith, that they might be interpreted.” But the narrator tells us that Stan was none of these: “He was no interpreter. He shifted beside his fire at the suggestion that he might have been. He was nothing much. He was a man.”

Intentionally or not, these opinions seem to alternate from being those of Stan and those of the third-person narrator: Stan is “uncomfortable” at the suggestion that he might be an interpreter, and it can be said that the narrator is merely voicing Stan’s thoughts; at the same time, however, it appears that the authoritative narrator—the authoritative Other—is telling the reader that Stan is nothing much. He is none of the things that Stan’s mother desires, but he is also nothing else. Stan is, at this moment of the story, a meaningless individual, but he also has the semblance of the “nothingness” of a tabula rasa: he can create something from this nothingness. But that Stan is nothing and desires nothing is not entirely accurate: the narrator tells us that Stan’s only desire was for “permanence.” However, it is a desire that came and went: he longed for permanence, but where it was to take place he did not yet know. Without the

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52 Ibid., 10.
53 Ibid., 11.
54 Ibid., 12.
action of seeking permanence, Stan’s life remains in a limbo of meaningless stasis. He
does not act and, therefore, does not create meaning. This stasis is broken, however,
when we are told of another event of Stan’s past—the death of his mother—and how
his dying mother told Stan of a piece of land he was to inherit. Stan is initially unsure as
to what the property means to him:

The young man’s breath thickened, his heart tolled against his ribs—was it for a liberation
or imprisonment? He did not know. Only that this scrubby, anonymous land was about to
become his, and that his life was taking shape for the first time.\footnote{Ibid.}

Stan, it would seem, had no choice in possessing his inheritance—the property is his.
Yet he is faced with a choice as to how he will act towards this inheritance: Is it to be a
liberation or an imprisonment? Is it to be the permanence he both desires and dreads?
Stan must choose how he will live in relation to this inheritance. Indeed, the inheritance
of this land can be seen as the catalyst for Stan’s existential freedom, but also the
catalyst for the anxiety of this freedom, made visceral as his heart tolls against his ribs.
But, because of this new freedom which has been thrust upon him, Stan also sees that
his life is taking shape insofar as it is up to him to do what he will, such is the
significance of his new freedom.

Following his mother’s death, Stan buys a cart and sets off to his newly
inherited land, and new beginnings, and the story returns to the NOW-story when Stan
and his dog arrive on the land:

They reached their destination, and ate, and slept, and in the morning of frost, beside the
ashes of a fire, were faced with the prospect of leading some kind of life. Of making that
life purposeful. Of opposing silence and rock and tree. . . .

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid., 15.}
... And the young man, after sighing a good deal, and turning in his bags, in which the crumbs of chaff still tickled and a flea or two kept him company, flung himself into the morning. There was no other way.

But to scrape the ash, but to hew with the whole body as well as axe the grey hunks of fallen wood, but to stamp the blood to life, and the ground thawing took life too, the long ribbons of grass bending and moving as the sun released, the rocks settling into peace of recovered sun, the glug and tumble of water slowly at first, heard again somewhere, the sun climbing ever, with towards it smoke thin but certain that the man made.

A little bird with straight-up tail flickered and took the crumb that lay at the man’s feet.

The man’s jaws took shape upon the crusts of stale bread. His jaws that were well shaped, strong, with a bristling of sun about the chin. This was gold.

Down through him wound the long ribbon of warm tea. He felt glad.

As the day increased, Stan Parker emerged and, after going here and there, simply looking at what was his, began to tear the bush apart.\(^\text{57}\)

Stan flings himself into the morning, and into the abyss of the nothingness that is his indeterminable future. He is the mythical figure of the phoenix, waking near his ashes on a new morning, free. And from his freedom the meaningful individual is born and emerges. He sets out to make life purposeful, opposing silence and rock and tree; opposing the inauthentic, meaningless stasis which dominated his previous life. He begins to violently clear the land, a symbolic clearing of the past and the beginning of an *ahistorical* future; the cleaning of the slate, making way for a new existential beginning.

The rhetorical significance of this beginning is that Stan’s pre-existential life is summarised as a flashback in the relatively short first chapter. The past is dwelt on only briefly, sparsely, before the story moves forwards. It signifies the insignificance of Stan’s life before the inheritance of the land, and the meaningfulness that the

\(^{57}\text{Ibid., 15–16.}\)
Inheritance has enabled him to create in his life. Rhetorically, the narrator is as much saying that from this moment on, from the moment Stan first wields his axe into the tree, his life is becoming meaningful—Stan has the possibility of creating a personal narrative with an intended meaning, the *tick of tick-tock*, and nothing that has come before that moment need be given detail within the discourse. Stan’s past is nothing but a memory in the NOW-story and can be described in the same scarce and faded detail of a memory. This is also significant if we consider that the discursive boundary of *The Tree of Man* also creates a “corporeal” boundary as it is the beginning of a *book*—a physical object which, as Roland Barthes says of the literary work, “can be held in the hand.”58 This gives the NOW-story of the discourse a sense of the “actual,” of existing, whereas a memory—a flashback—is immaterial. But this corporeal boundary also gives Stan Parker’s character a sense of becoming as the future in *The Tree of Man*—a future which does not “exist” but is part of his existence, part of becoming who the character is to become—is somewhat corporeal. In contrast, Stan’s undiscoursed past, which may only be alluded to, lies outside of the corporeal discourse, outside of the pages of the book. The reader can see that the character has a future, which is primarily the chronological movement of the story from beginning to end; but the reader cannot see the character’s past. It is not NOW. A past that does not exist as discourse—as pages in a book—does not have what may be described as “corporeal conviction.” The character’s undiscoursed past is, therefore, meaningless, firstly because of the rhetoric of the novelist’s choice not to include the past of a character within the material pages of the novel, and because it is a choice to exclude or merely hint at a past because it is not significant to understanding the story of the character; because they do not pertain to the story proper. This also reflects the attitude of the novelist insofar as the previous choice—the first existential beginning—is not important. The third-person narrator implicitly suggests that the choices they make within the pages of the novel are the most significant choices—these choices create a narrative, not the choices outside of the novel’s pages. It is from here that there is

meaningful intention and from here that Stan’s personal narrative begins. And it is from this beginning onwards that the reader must base his or her evaluation.

**Charles and Emma Bovary**

White’s method of introducing Stan and eliding much of Stan’s past is almost identical to that of Flaubert’s in *Madame Bovary* when he introduces the characters of Charles Bovary and Emma. Charles is very similar to Stan in that it is his mother—the “original” Madame Bovary—who decides much of who he is to be:

She dreamed of high office, she already saw him, tall, handsome, talented, established, an engineer, or a magistrate. She taught him to read, and even taught him, on an old piano that she had, to sing two or three little ballads.\(^{59}\)

With these grand designs in mind, she “installs” him in his studies of medicine, she finds a room for him, and she has meals sent to him. Charles does briefly attempt to rebel against his mother’s wishes (Charles becomes a “tavern-goer” which he feels is a “precious act of liberty” and an “initiation into the great world,\(^{60}\) but subsequently fails in his studies. This rebellion is also a failed attempt at creating his own life—of breaking away from his mother—as he soon returns to the control of his mother and begins what is to be a more successful attempt at his studies:

He got quite a decent pass. What a great day for his mother! They gave a fine big dinner.

Where should he go to practise his art? To Tostes. There was only one old doctor there. For ages and ages Madame Bovary had been watching out for his death, and the old chap hadn’t even packed his bags before Charles was installed just across the road, as his successor.

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\(^{60}\) Ibid., 10.
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But it wasn't quite enough to have brought up her son, have him taught medicine and discover Tostes for him to practise in: he had to have a wife. She found one for him: the widow of a bailiff from Dieppe, forty-five years old with twelve hundred francs a year.

Although she was ugly, thin as a rake, and splendidly bepimpled, Madame Dubuc had no lack of suitors to choose from. To accomplish her plan, Mère Bovary had to trounce them all, and she even thwarted with great skill the machinations of a pork-butcher who had the backing of the priests.  

This passage clearly shows the dominant influence of Charles's mother over his life, his choices, and freedom. What we see is that Madame Dubuc becomes the "new" Madame Bovary but also becomes the "new" controlling authority of Charles's life. And, indeed, not until Charles meets Emma does he tentatively begin to make his own choices and recognise his own freedom. However, the moment of their meeting is significant not only in his change of attitude towards his freedom: there is also a sense of significance in the way that both Charles and Emma are respectively introduced into the story. Prior to meeting Emma, Charles is given no direct free speech—the narrator of the story does not allow Charles to speak in his own words; instead he is paraphrased and conversations are implied. The only time Charles does speak is when he is first introduced as a boy of fifteen to his new school mates. Having been asked his name, Charles can only stutter the word "Charbovari." Soon after this, the anxious Charles loses his cap. When he moves to find it he is asked by the teacher what it is he is looking for; he replies: "My ca . . ." Charles does not speak—and when given the opportunity he can only stutter; he makes a mess of it as if he were not the authority of his own voice—as if he were coming to terms with his voice. This is a basic symbol for his lack of freedom which continues throughout his schooling and his first marriage. However, Charles is eventually given a voice, again when he is looking for something—this time in the presence of Emma, the daughter of a man Charles is treating:

61 Ibid., 11.
62 Ibid., 5.
"Are you looking for something?" she asked.

"My riding-crop, please," he said.

And he began to hunt around on the bed, behind the doors, under the chairs; it had fallen to the ground, between the sacks and the wall. Mademoiselle Emma noticed it; she bent over the sacks of wheat. Charles, gallantly, sprang into action and, as he reached down over her, he felt his chest brush against the back of the girl beneath him. She straightened up, red-faced, and looked at him over her shoulder, handing him his riding-crop.64

This innocuous meeting with Emma is significant because Emma herself has hitherto not spoken directly in the novel. She too has been without voice, and so their conversation, and their awkward coming together, signifies a new bond and a new beginning for the two of them. The significance of their bond and the insignificance of Charles's bond with his first wife is further emphasised by the sudden death of the latter. It is sudden as it takes place in only the second chapter of the thirty-five chapters that comprise the novel's three parts. On this early departure, the intrusive narrator makes the somewhat ironic comment: "She was dead! How astonishing!"65 What the death of the "second" Madame Bovary means is that the barrier to Charles's freedom and the barrier to the proper story—the story of the "third" Madame Bovary which the narrator wants to tell—is removed. Of course, after this initial introduction of Charles and Emma, the "meaningful" story essentially becomes Emma's (her increased dissatisfaction with married life and her subsequent affairs) and the story of "the flat as pavement" Charles is once again relegated to the background. The story of Charles is initially the centre—he is the centre of the action, even if they are not really his own actions. But, with the introduction of Emma his choices and actions become secondary to Emma's. What is more, his choices and actions lack discursive "volume" and corporeality and thus lack meaningfulness.

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 16.
Ishmael

A third example, where a corporeal boundary signifies the meaninglessness that lies in the nothingness outside of this boundary, is the first-person narration of the story of Ishmael in Melville's *Moby-Dick*, which, like the story of Stan Parker, begins at the precise moment of a crux in Ishmael's life and signifies a new existential beginning for Ishmael. He is telling a story of his past but he omits all knowledge of his past beyond this “present” fragment of his life and offers no context or contrast of his existential beginning with his earlier past or what we will from now simply refer to as his “past.” Moreover, Ishmael somewhat explicitly tells us of the meaninglessness of his past, as is evidenced by Ishmael's opening discourse:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.⁶⁶

Ishmael's life has come to a crux—a crux, he suggests, that he has experienced before. This claim may hint at more of Ishmael's past, but it would appear that it is somewhat of a repetitive and meaningless cycle: he appears to find meaningfulness in life, only to fall back into meaninglessness. And now, once again, Ishmael has come to the realisation that his life is meaningless, so much so that he is willing to take his own life in the face of this meaninglessness. These thoughts strikingly resemble Albert Camus’ discussion on the problem of suicide and his claim that without meaning there is no reason to live. Ishmael is facing this exact same problem and has drawn the same conclusion. However, Ishmael substitutes this morbid possibility with a new meaningful beginning: he substitutes the pistol and ball by choosing to “take to the ship.” This choice can be interpreted in two ways: it is a choice of a new existential beginning, to negate the meaninglessness of the past, and put an end to the stasis of meaninglessness; or it is a choice to avoid or escape his anxious and authentic feelings of meaninglessness by immersing himself in the “inauthenticity” of the ship. In any case, Ishmael chooses for himself: he chooses to negate his past and embrace his new sense of freedom.

Ishmael’s attitude towards the past is reflected in his choosing to summarise his past with two statements, namely, that he has little to no money in his purse, and nothing particular to interest him on shore. They are stasis statements which represent the culmination of Ishmael’s past—a past that “was”—and now “is”—now exists as the NOW-story begins. All that has come before the moment that the story begins can be essentially described and summarised by these stasis statements. To begin this story in this manner is a purposeful choice made by Ishmael—the autobiographical narrator—and Melville—the real author behind Ishmael—which alerts the reader to the insignificance of Ishmael’s past which he does not recount in any great detail. It is as much an emphasis on what is to come as it is a lack of emphasis on what has come before. Because of this “boundary,” the reader discerns the significance of this beginning, over and above other possible beginnings, and can assume that what the narrator will communicate from this beginning is of value and interest to the reader.
But there is also one other, more subtle indication of the lack of significance that Ishmael places on his past, namely the symbolic meaning behind the opening line: “Call me Ishmael.” From this sentence it can be inferred that Ishmael does not say that his name is Ishmael. It is an instruction to his reader and is as much as saying: “You, reader, are to call me Ishmael—the name I have given to the narrator and hero of the story I am about to tell—whereas others in my past—the past which existed before my story begins—have called me otherwise.” This is in keeping with the common association of the name Ishmael with the figure of the exile: Ishmael is in exile from his past, and he has identified himself as an exile by calling himself Ishmael. However, there are at least two other possible implications which can be derived from this statement. Firstly, Ishmael’s past, which can be defined by his actions, are the actions of an individual who is “not-Ishmael” but someone else. It is an Ishmael-of-the-past, which precedes the NOW-story. It is an “other’s” existence which belongs to the past, and when the reader calls him by his new name it signifies a negation of the other self, and the birth of a new. Here the nothingness outside of the corporeal boundary symbolises the nothingness of death, just as the nothingness outside of the discourse of Stan Parker’s life symbolises the “death” of his childhood and the birth of adulthood.

A second implication of Ishmael’s desire for a new identity through a new name can also be read as an affirmation of the Other’s role in forging and understanding his individual identity. Those who knew Ishmael-of-the-past also knew of his actions; as such, the name given to him by the Other-of-the-past is the name that appropriately belongs to his past actions. Just as a gambler is known to his friends and family as a gambler by way of his actions, so too is the Ishmael-of-the-past known and named by the Other of his past. The reader, however, does not belong to the Other which precedes his story, and so Ishmael gives the reader an “appellation” which corresponds and reflects the narrator and hero of his “present” and future story. For Ishmael to instruct the reader to call him thus, is as much as saying that he negates the name and the past which lie beyond the beginning (and the boundary) of his story, and

See Tom Quirk’s explanatory notes in *Moby-Dick*, by Melville, 636.
the name *Ishmael* symbolises a new beginning, and a name deserving of the story he is going to tell. This is significant if we consider that the reader can only evaluate the meaning of Ishmael’s life by the segment of life that he reveals—the segment of life that represents the meaning of *Ishmael*.

However, we may also understand the name *Ishmael* as an empty space, an empty sign, to be filled by the future discourse. This claim can be understood if we consider Docherty’s description of how the first mention of a character, be it the character’s name or the pronominal “I,” creates a gap, a *blanc sémantique* in the sense of the novels; they create the gap in our understanding which requires plenitude, a gap therefore which prompts us to read on and “fill” with meaningful significance the empty space in the name as it occurs in the fictional world.⁶⁸

When Ishmael instructs the reader to call him Ishmael, he is creating an empty space which is to be filled with his telling of the ensuing story. Moreover, this empty space represents the nihlutation of his filled (meaningful/less) past. Ishmael fills the present emptiness with the meaningful significance of his future story.

*Quoyle*

A final, more contemporary example of a character’s story in which the existential and discursive beginnings coincide and effectively omit much of the character’s past including his or her biological beginning and formative years is Quoyle in Annie Proulx’s *The Shipping News* (1993). Once again the story begins at a crux in the hero’s life; however, Quoyle’s existential beginning is much subtler than previous examples, reflecting his far more reserved disposition; and unlike the previous examples such as those characters of the *Bildungsroman*, Quoyle’s formative years appear to end when
he is almost middle-aged. In the second paragraph of the first page the narrator summarises the first thirty-odd years of Quoyle’s life with several stasis statements:

Hive-spangled, gut roaring with gas and cramp, he survived childhood; at the state university, hand clapped over his chin, he camouflaged torment with smiles and silence.
Stumbled through his twenties and into his thirties learning to separate his feelings from his life, counting on nothing. He ate prodigiously, liked a ham knuckle, buttered spuds.69

This summary of Quoyle’s life is understatedly economical, and, like the story of Charles in Madame Bovary, rhetorically implies that these years are essentially meaningless and must be understood as being of little significance when interpreting and evaluating the whole of Quoyle’s life—what is to become the NOW-story and the greater volume of the novel’s discourse. In this period it is also implied that he makes no explicit choices, and, like a picaro character, seems to be the affected, not the effector, of his own story. Indeed, he merely “survives childhood” and “stumbles through his twenties into his thirties.” This evaluation is soon made more explicit: “His earliest sense of self was as a distant figure: there in the foreground was his family; here, at the limit of the far view, was he.”70 Moreover, in his thirties, Quoyle “falls” into a job as a newspaper reporter for The Mockingbird Record—a job acquired for him by his new friend Partridge. Indeed, Quoyle is “given” both a job and an identity of sorts which he seems to accept merely because it is suggested from an “authoritative” friend. But it is not really “him” as is evidenced at the end of the first chapter:

He abstracted his life from the times. He believed he was a newspaper reporter, yet read no paper except The Mockingbird Record, and so managed to ignore terrorism, climatological change, collapsing governments, chemical spills, plagues, recession and failing banks, floating debris, the disintegrating ozone layer. Volcanoes, earthquakes and hurricanes, religious frauds, defective vehicles and scientific charlatans, mass murderers

68 Docherty, Reading (Absent) Character, 47.
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and serial killers, tidal waves of cancer, AIDS, deforestation and exploding aircraft were as remote to him as braid catches, canions and rosette-embroidered garters. Scientific journals spewed reports of mutant viruses, of machines pumping life through the near-dead, of the discovery that the galaxies were streaming apocalyptically toward an invisible Great Attractor like flies into a vacuum cleaner nozzle. That was the stuff of others’ lives. He was waiting for his to begin.

He got in the habit of walking around the trailer and asking aloud, “Who knows?” He said, “Who knows?” For no one knew. He meant, anything could happen.

A spinning coin, still balanced on its rim, may fall in either direction. 71

Quoyle recognises that he does not know where to begin his life; what choices he will make. He has not begun to live his life because he has not yet chosen a life. From here, the story again moves quickly: within the next six pages (some six years of story-time) Quoyle meets and marries Petal—a controlling woman who makes him her cuckold and to whom he has two children. Within the next ten pages (only several days of story-time) Quoyle’s parents commit suicide, he loses his job at a local paper, and his children are abducted by Petal who proceeds to sell them to a paedophile. Fortunately, the children are soon found and are returned to Quoyle unharmed. Again because of the economy of the discourse, it appears that none of these events were of Quoyle’s own choosing; however, the abduction and return of the children does seem to act as a mini-catalyst as it throws into relief his love for his children and makes him recognise his desire to be a good father, which in his eyes, is a serious and meaningful project. And it is here that his aunt, whom he has become acquainted with after his parent’s funeral, suggests he start a new life in Newfoundland, a place where he once had relatives:

70 Ibid., 2.
71 Ibid., 11.
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“You can look at it this way,” she said. “You’ve got a chance to start out all over again. A new place, new people, new sights. A clean slate. See, you can be anything you want with a fresh start. In a way, that’s what I am doing myself.”

Quoyle agrees to the suggestion, but for Quoyle it is not a new start but a start, albeit a humble one. Indeed, Quoyle gradually emerges as a much stronger, purposeful character: he endeavours to become a loving father, he gets a job at the local newspaper, he rebuilds an old house he has inherited, and, despite not being able to swim, he finds a boat (a necessity in Newfoundland). Most significantly, he finds a new partner to share his life with. All of these choices and actions are given a much fuller description and occupy the greater fraction of the novel’s discourse (the story-time is only a few years with just over three-hundred pages or almost ninety-five percent of the total pages dedicated to their explication). They are the meaningful events which are chosen and caused by Quoyle after his humble existential beginning and they come to form the proper NOW-story to which the greater volume of the discourse is dedicated.

3. Secondary Existential Beginnings and Discursive Beginnings

The discursive beginning of the story of Ishmael can be said to differ from that of Stan Parker and, to some extent, Quoyle’s insofar as their beginnings are most certainly their first existential beginnings, whereas Ishmael’s existential beginning could be his second (or third or fourth etc.). It is because of this that Ishmael could also be an example of the third combination of beginnings in fiction where the first existential beginning (E) of a character begins before the NOW-story (a) begins—the tick of tick-tock occurs before the beginning of the discourse. We can say that these stories begin

72 Ibid., 27.
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*in medias res* of the creation of the characters' meanings, which is essentially the middle of the characters' personal narratives. This form of story differs from the previous examples as the past of the character, including some kind of existential beginning, is not discoursed, and yet must still be considered somewhat significant and meaningful (or meaningless), especially as a distinctive *contrast* for the second (or third or fourth etc.) existential beginning. These secondary *Augenblicke* become the first kernel events of the story, thereby omitting all of the character’s childhood and his or her “first” existential beginning. What we often find is that these undiscoursed, first existential beginnings have begun to “lose meaningfulness” which is to say that the meaningful choices made by the characters, begin, or have begun, to depreciate in value such that creation moves towards a form of “destruction.” When the destruction ends and is complete there is some form of *Augenblick*, such that the end of destruction is reversed and becomes the beginning of a new creation: the main action of the novel changes direction with a new kernel event and with it a “new” existential beginning (*E₂* in figure 4 below). 

![Figure 4: Beginning of the discourse *in medias res* of character's creation of meaning.](image)

What we also notice in these novels is a much narrower span of time which, as Hochman describes,

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73 Indeed, the beginning of our individual personal narratives is not only the recognition of our freedom to choose, but also the recognition of our freedom to negate our past. As Jean-Paul Sartre claims, we are free to negate our past, and through this negation we begin anew.
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is the common medium of dramatically perceptible dynamism in character. The most
dynamic and conflict-ridden characters, those subject to the most highly dramatised
sense of process, tend to be those who, like Anna Karenina, Raskolnikov, and Othello,
figure in works that focus largely on present actions and therefore possess relatively
shallow time dimensions. Such characters tend to be engaged with events that follow
from their choices in the present action.74

These beginnings in medias res are centred on characters that have come to a conflict
in their lives—a conflict which has come after their formative choices which may, in the
present action, have been retrospectively deemed false or inauthentic, which is to say
they were choices that were not their own. It is a conflict in medius res of adulthood.

Anna Karenina

Beginnings in medias res can of course be found in many novels including those of
Jane Austen, George Eliot, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Virginia Woolf. But it is the
description of the change in meaningful project of the character of Anna Karenina in
Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina that we find its epitome. The story of the life of Anna begins
when Anna is of a more mature age: she is no longer a young lady, but a married
woman, with an eight-year-old son. We can assume that Anna has chosen some kind
of meaningful project for her life before the NOW-story begins, such that the action to
follow is set after this “undiscoursed” existential beginning. The impact and importance
or, indeed, lack of importance, of this initial choice is only disclosed later in the novel.
However, like the examples of Stan Parker and Ishmael, the insignificance of her past
and her past choices is rhetorically implied by the lack of detailing in the discourse, but
also by the lack of corporeal conviction: Anna’s first meaningful choice is not detailed
within the discourse and it does not exist within the NOW-story; therefore, we may
assume that it is not a lasting choice.

74 Hochman, Character in Literature, 146.
Anna is first introduced in the second chapter of the first part of *Anna Karenina* by her brother, Stepan Arkadyich in his discussion with Matvei the valet:

“Matvei, my sister Anna Arkadyevna is coming tomorrow,” he said, stopping for a moment the glossy, plump little hand of the barber, who was clearing a pink path between his long, curly side-whiskers.

“Thank God,” said Matvei, showing by this answer that he understood the significance of this arrival in the same way as his master, that is, that Anna Arkadyevna, Stepan Arkadyich’s beloved sister, might contribute to the reconciliation of husband and wife.\(^{75}\)

The reconciliation is that of Stepan and his wife Dolly, following Stepan’s affair with their children’s former French teacher. His first action is to call on Anna to talk to Dolly in the hope that she will somehow help in the reconciliation. What is significant, however, is that the reader is told that Anna is “beloved” which does much to establish her amicable character and demeanour—a characterisation which is initially echoed innumerable times by many other characters in the novel. Indeed, when Dolly hears that Anna is coming, she remonstrates that she “can’t receive her,”\(^{76}\) but is nevertheless pleased that Anna is indeed coming, stating: “I know nothing but the very best about her, and with regard to myself, I’ve seen only kindness and friendship from her.”\(^{77}\) And when Anna does come, Countess Vronsky (whom Anna travels with from Petersburg to Moscow, in order to aid the reconciliation) also praises Anna: “I could go around the world with you and not be bored. You’re one of those sweet women with whom it’s pleasant both to talk and to be silent.”\(^{78}\) From these more or less explicit comments, it is implied that Anna is a sincere, happy, and thoughtful individual, and that her actions to this culminating moment of the NOW-story have contributed to a meaningful and happy existence. She has a meaningful life and her project is valued by

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\(^{75}\) Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 4–5.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 11.

\(^{77}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 63.
herself and by others. What is more, it would seem that the *tick* of her life will move naturally towards the expected *tock*. But, the plot of *Anna Karenina* is not a simple or a static plot (nor is it a singular plot insofar as there are two stories being told, namely Anna’s and Levin’s); indeed, the stasis of both Anna’s life and, necessarily, the plot of *Anna Karenina* are inevitably met with a complication which comes in the form of Count Vronsky, who falls in love with Anna, but he is also the “unwitting” catalyst for Anna’s tragic downfall.

Vronsky plays a very significant part in Anna’s life, not only by his actions, but also symbolically. This can be understood if we consider how Anna is properly “introduced” in the novel, which is to say the moment in which she first appears and speaks. Vronsky is at the train station to meet his mother who has travelled with Anna from Petersburg. An unnamed Anna exits the carriage and Vronsky excuses himself to allow her to pass. He is himself about to enter the carriage to meet his mother, but is compelled to look at her again:

[He] felt a need to glance at her once more—not because she was very beautiful, not because of the elegance and modest grace that could be seen in her whole figure, but because there was something especially gentle and tender in the expression of her sweet-looking face as she stepped past him. As he looked back, she also turned her head. Her shining grey eyes, which seemed dark because of their thick lashes, rested amiably and attentively on his face, as if she recognised him, and at once wandered over the approaching crowd as though looking for someone. In that brief glance Vronsky had time to notice the restrained animation that played over her face and fluttered between her shining eyes and the barely noticeable smile that curved her red lips. It was as if a surplus of something so overflowed her being that it expressed itself beyond her will, now in the brightness of her glance, now in her smile. She deliberately extinguished the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will in a barely noticeable smile.\(^79\)

\(^79\) Ibid., 61.
It can be inferred that this lady is Anna Karenina; however, this inference is only confirmed when Vronsky recognises who the lady is, and gives Anna her name. This recognition takes place after Vronsky partly overhears a conversation Anna is having with an unknown Ivan Petrovich\(^\text{80}\) (a conversation which draws attention to the strength and conviction of Anna's character), but also the conversation that immediately follows between Anna and Vronsky's mother:

> “I still don't agree with you,” the lady's voice said.
> “A Petersburg point of view, madam.”
> “Not Petersburg, merely a woman's,” she answered.
> “Well, allow me to kiss your hand.”
> “Good-bye, Ivan Petrovich. Do see if my brother is here, and send him to me,” the lady said just by the door, and entered the compartment again.
> “Have you found your brother?” asked Countess Vronsky, addressing the lady.

Vronsky remembered now that this was Mme Karenina.\(^\text{81}\)

Anna is given a name by Vronsky: he tells us who this “lady” is. But his naming of Anna differs from Stepan's earlier mention of her name: Stepan names Anna as an incorporeal thing, a name belonging to a memory, a memory of the past and which is also somewhat historical. Contrastingly, Vronsky gives a name to the Anna of the “present-tense”; his doing so signifies a new, ahistorical existence for Anna with Vronsky. His naming her brings her into “present, corporeal existence” just as the narrator of *The Tree of Man* brings Stan Parker into existence. Vronsky's naming of Anna can also be said to signify the beginnings of a new meaningful existence between the two. However, for Anna, her new beginning is only recognised after the fact, specifically when she meets Vronsky for a second time (a meeting cunningly devised by Vronsky) and finds that she has feelings for him: “Anna, looking down, at once recognised Vronsky, and a strange feeling of pleasure suddenly stirred in her heart,

\(^{80}\) Schultze states that “from later conversations and events, the idea arises that Anna is expressing her tolerant views on adultery.” Schultze, *The Structure of ‘Anna Karenina’*, 142.
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together with a fear of something."\(^{82}\) Anna feels a sense of pleasure, a new awakening of pleasant, “meaningful” feelings. But she also seems to feel anxious towards the possible repercussions of this new beginning; a feeling of anxiety towards what actions she may choose in the face of this new feeling. At first, Anna denies this pleasure, this happiness, deciding to return to Petersburg such that her “good and usual life will go on as before.”\(^{83}\) However, this is very much an inauthentic choice, as when Anna returns home it is not “good or usual,” especially when she meets her husband, Alexei Karenin:

Some unpleasant feeling gnawed at her heart as she met his unwavering and weary gaze, as if she had expected him to look different. She was especially struck by the feeling of dissatisfaction with herself that she experienced on meeting him. This was an old, familiar feeling, similar to the state of pretence she experienced in her relations with her husband; but previously she had not noticed it, while now she was clearly and painfully aware of it.

“"Yes, as you see, your tender husband, tender as in the second year of marriage, is burning with desire to see you,” he said in his slow, high voice and in the tone he almost always used with her, a tone in mockery of someone who might actually mean what he said.\(^{84}\)

Anna is struck by her new feelings toward Karenin; he is changed in her eyes, or changed from the image she expected. But even Anna’s son, Seryozha, has become somewhat of a disappointment to her:

She had imagined him better than he was in reality. She had to descend into reality to enjoy him as he was. But he was charming even as he was, with his blond curls, blue eyes and full, shapely legs in tight-fitting stockings.\(^{85}\)

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81 Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 62.
82 Ibid., 75.
83 Ibid., 99.
84 Ibid., 104.
85 Ibid., 107.
Anna has a revelation, albeit an unwanted revelation, an *Augenblick*—a moment of recognition. Her past has taken on a new, retrospective meaning; it has taken the form of inauthentic meaninglessness, and her love for Vronsky signifies a new desire—a new authentic beginning. This new beginning follows her first undiscoursed existential beginning, which is initially understood by the various stasis statements used to describe Anna's life—statements which imply a sense of meaningful happiness, an implication echoed by the opinion of the other characters. This meaningful project is, however, destroyed, and the creation of a new meaningful project begins.

But if this new beginning is in a sense authentic, does this mean that Anna's life before her rebirth has been inauthentic? Has she been living in bad faith, ignoring her true feelings? It would seem that there has indeed been some "authentic" doubt in Anna's mind about the meaningfulness of her previous life with Karenin. This is evidenced by the disclosure of how Karenin and Anna were first bound. It is Anna's brother, Stepan, who offers an account of the "mistake" of their marriage:

"I'll begin from the beginning: you married a man twenty years older than yourself. You married without love or not knowing what love is. That was a mistake, let's assume."

"A terrible mistake!" said Anna.86

Later we are also told by the narrator of the story of Karenin's and Anna's courtship:

During his governorship, Anna's aunt, a rich provincial lady, had brought the already not-so-young man but young governor together with her niece and put him in such a position that he had either to declare himself or to leave town. Alexei Alexandrovich had hesitated for a long time. There were then as many reasons for this step as against it, and there was no decisive reason that could make him abandon his rule: when in doubt, don't. But Anna's aunt insinuated through an acquaintance that he had already compromised the

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86 Ibid., 427.
Both Anna and Karenin are bound together against their will, and, as such, their marriage, and the happiness that seemingly existed between them, was essentially lived in bad faith and is therefore meaningless.

What must be noted, however, is that before the falseness of the Karenins’ marriage is disclosed, there is a strong rhetorical influence of the overt narrator (again clearly voicing the opinions of Tolstoy) on the reader’s evaluation of Anna’s choice to have an affair with Vronsky. The narrator describes Karenin as having a “habitual mocking smile” and “big weary eyes,” such that not only is the hint of a loveless marriage made, but Karenin is portrayed as incapable of being loved. What this further implies is that instead of Anna’s choice to have an affair being considered abject, without value, and therefore meaningless, it is easily forgiven and becomes meaningful.

The overt rhetorical influence of Tolstoy on the reader’s evaluation of Anna becomes even more evident if we consider that Tolstoy initially portrayed Karenin “as a warm, sensitive soul, cultivated and kind. His main fault is sentimentality,” but, in the final version, is represented as “a dried-up, self-centred, narrow-minded man, a pure product of Petersburg bureaucracy. . . . He paralyses and disfigures everything he touches; for him, his wife is simply one item of his establishment.” It is because of this unflattering portrayal of Karenin that the reader can forgive Anna when, following her revelation, she authentically chooses to begin a relationship with Vronsky; when she acts upon her proper existential beginning, having previously, inauthentically refused Vronsky. And Tolstoy did indeed endeavour to portray Anna as a tragic figure, capable of sympathy from the reader. This is despite Tolstoy initially disliking his original construction of Anna, condemning her in the name of morality and seeing her as an

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87 Ibid., 507.
88 Troyat, Tolstoy, 499.
89 Ibid., 500.
“incarnation of lechery.” But Tolstoy began to change his attitude and gradually began to “fall in love” with Anna and because of this, Tolstoy began to re-write Anna. He endeavoured to “elevate and justify Anna” through her looks and actions, to the point that “Anna’s appeal owes nothing to the artifices of coquetry. A charm she is unaware of radiates from her body.”

What is interesting, however, is that the reader is also told of how the other characters of the novel feel about this illicit relationship between Vronsky and Anna:

The majority of young women, envious of Anna and long since weary of her being called righteous, were glad of what they surmised and only waited for the turnabout of public opinion to be confirmed before they fell upon her with the full weight of their scorn. They were already preparing the lumps of mud they would fling at her when the time came. The majority of older and more highly placed people were displeased by this impending social scandal.

Karenin himself also elicits scorn from the Other: “It was a very pleasant conversation. They were denouncing the Karenins, wife and husband.” This opinion of the other characters in the novel is of great concern for Karenin in his want for keeping up appearances:

“I want to warn you,” he said in a low voice, “that by indiscretion and light-mindedness you may give society occasion to talk about you. Your much too animated conversation tonight with Count Vronsky” (he articulated this name firmly and with calm measuredness) “attracted attention.”

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90 Ibid.  
91 Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 174.  
92 Ibid., 135.  
93 Ibid., 146.
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From this statement Anna surmises to herself: “He doesn’t care,” she thought. “But society noticed and that troubles him.” Anna alludes to the inauthentic influence of the Other over Karenin’s feelings towards her relationship with Vronsky and towards their own relationship. Anna authentically embraces her meaningful choice, whereas Karenin’s concern is of his reputation and not of the unhappiness and absurdity of their new situation. And indeed this is very much a new situation and new life:

From that evening a new life began for Alexei Alexandrovich and his wife. Nothing special happened. Anna went into society as always, visited Princess Betsy especially often, and met Vronsky everywhere. Alexei Alexandrovich saw it but could do nothing.95

A new narrative block begins and the middle of Anna’s life “begins” again, but, also, the story proper begins. However, what also begins is a shift from the initial one-sided, authoritative evaluation of Anna by the Other—the Other’s “filling in” of the empty space that was the name Anna—to a contrast between the increasingly negative evaluation of the objective Other, and the evaluation of the reader, who is able to know more of Anna’s subjective life. Indeed, it is from here that the reader is able to interpret and evaluate Anna’s life with more accuracy and equanimity than the other characters of Anna Karenina, as Anna is concomitantly and subjectively “filling in” the empty space that is her name. The reader no longer judges Anna through the opinion of the Other but can begin to interpret and evaluate Anna’s life from an omniscient and superior position. By giving Anna a subjective voice, Tolstoy gives Anna life, and gives her the ability to decry and, indeed, invalidate the opinion of the Other.96 She is not a Sartrean “dead life”—an object for the Other—and she is not objectively given meaning by the Other: she is subjectively creating meaning. Only the reader is privileged to see this subjectivity, and, therefore, only the reader can produce an authoritative and accurate

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94 Ibid., 146–47.
95 Ibid., 148.
96 This is very much related to John Bayley’s claim that “the great author can make us see his characters both as we see ourselves and as we see other people. . . . Art achieves here a
evaluation of Anna’s life—an evaluation enabled and constructed by Tolstoy. It is this aspect of Tolstoy’s methods that properly reflects John Bayley’s description of how the success of an author’s approach to the theme of love is “closely linked with his attitude towards his own characters—that [an] author, in fact, is best on love who best loves his own creations” and who has “an attitude towards them which is analogous to our feelings towards those we love in life; and an intense interest in their personalities combined with a sort of detached solicitude, a respect for their freedom.” Tolstoy, in his love for Anna, gives her the freedom to defend herself against her accusers. But, at the same time, what Tolstoy also effectively does is give the reader courage to authentically evaluate Anna’s life without being swayed by the “they.” This is to say that instead of allowing the Other to dictate the evaluation of the meaning of Anna’s life, Tolstoy enables the reader to authentically evaluate Anna’s life and enables the reader to make his or her own decision as to the meaningfulness of Anna’s choices. Anna’s life with Vronsky is not meaningless because the other characters of the novel tell the reader that it is meaningless; the meaning of Anna’s life is contingent on what the reader considers to be meaningful.

**Nostromo**

In *Anna Karenina* we see how the ironic mode enables the reader to evaluate Anna with greater accuracy and equanimity, such that the reader can separate Anna from the opinions of the “they.” However, a second example, which similarly begins the NOW-story *after* an initial, existential beginning, can be said to “undermine” the subjective creation of meaning, and emphasise the dominance of the Other in the conferral of meaning. This example is the story of Nostromo (who is also known as Gian’ Battista,
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the Capataz de Cargadores (the Captain of the Stevedores), and, later, Captain Fidanza) in Joseph Conrad’s *Nostromo*.

Like Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, the discoursed story of *Nostromo* begins when Nostromo is of a mature age and we can assume that he has chosen a meaningful project for his life. Moreover, like *Anna Karenina*, *Nostromo* is very much concerned with questions of what makes life meaningful. As F. R. Leavis describes in *The Great Tradition* the main characters of *Nostromo* each [enact] a particular answer to the question that we feel working in the matter of the novel as a kind of informing or organising principle: what do men find to live for—what kinds of motive force or radical attitude can give life meaning, direction, coherence?

In very simple terms, Nostromo’s meaning of life centres on prestige and a desire to “be well spoken of.” This is his intended, meaningful project—a project which appears to have been imbedded in Nostromo’s mind by Old Giorgio Viola (the father-figure of Nostromo), who once told the then young Nostromo that “a good name . . . is a treasure.” It is, however, the journalist Martin Decoud who, in a letter to his sister, best surmises the desires of Nostromo:

“The only thing [Nostromo] seems to care for, as far as I have been able to discover, is to be well spoken of. An ambition fit for noble souls, but also a profitable one for an exceptionally intelligent scoundrel. Yes. His very words, ‘To be well spoken of. Sí, señor.’ He does not seem to make any difference between speaking and thinking. It is sheer naivénness or the practical point of view, I wonder? Exceptional individualities always interest me, because they are true to the general formula expressing the moral state of humanity.”

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98 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, 220.
100 Ibid., 194–195.
Nostromo’s desires are not initially disclosed to the reader; all that is disclosed is the opinion of the overt third-person narrator and the other characters in the novel. The narrator and the other characters of *Nostromo* serve to summarise the meaningful culmination of Nostromo’s past which, as Jacques Berthoud describes, is very much representative of the narrative style of *Nostromo*, as it “[brings] to the foreground not a single protagonist doubled by a single narrator but a number of equally prominent individuals, each of whom is repeatedly called upon to comment on his fellows.”\(^{101}\) The narrator describes Nostromo as an “invaluable fellow,” “a fellow in a thousand” (a claim the narrator uses twice), and as “the indispensable man, the tried and trusty Nostromo.”\(^{102}\) However, these claims are not merely the sentiments of the narrator but all the people of the fictional town of Sulaco in which the story takes place. Indeed, Nostromo’s reputation is known and avowed by many, none more so than Captain Mitchell (the commander of the O. S. N. Company’s ships) who describes Nostromo as “a man absolutely above reproach.”\(^{103}\) The prestigious reputation of Nostromo is disclosed by the narrator almost as if it were historical fact. Indeed, the way the narrator describes Nostromo’s past is almost indistinguishable from the way the narrator describes Sulaco’s past.\(^ {104}\) The implication of this assimilation is that Nostromo’s past and reputation is fixed, unquestionable, such that his reputation is essentially a stasis statement of what appears to be a meaningful past.

However, despite the appearance of the meaningfulness of Nostromo’s past, there is at the heart of his project an ominous sense of absurdity. More specifically, there is a conspicuous disparity between Nostromo’s meaningful intentions and the reality of the meaninglessness of such intentions. This absurdity and disparity of Nostromo’s reality is emphasised by the ironic mode of *Nostromo*, which, as F. R. Leavis states, permeates all the characters of *Nostromo*:

\(^{101}\) Berthoud, *Joseph Conrad*, 94.  
\(^{102}\) Conrad, *Nostromo*, 11, 12, 104.  
\(^{103}\) Ibid., 12.  
\(^ {104}\) Said states that in *Nostromo* “nearly everyone seems extremely anxious about both keeping and leaving a personal ‘record’ of his thoughts and action. This anxiety seems to be based upon an extraordinary preoccupation with the past, as if the past, left to itself, given only ordinary
On the whole we see the characters from the outside, and only as they belong to the ironic pattern—figures in the futilities of a public drama, against a dwarfing background of mountain and gulf.\textsuperscript{105}

Nostromo desires that his life be thought of as \emph{historical}, which is to say that he desires that his life be conferred with meaning by the Other as if it were a dead life.\textsuperscript{106} Indeed, Nostromo does not necessarily act \emph{ahistorically} as he chooses only to perpetuate what the Other thinks of him. He chooses not to alter his past. The absurdity of living in this manner is that he embraces exactly what “haunts” existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre. Nostromo embraces the dispossession and alienation of meaning in death, believing that prestige and his being spoken well of is a “reward” for his service. He again tells this to Decoud:

“‗I suppose, Don Martin,’ he began, in a thoughtful, speculative tone, ‘that the Señor Administrator of San Tomé will reward me some day if I save his silver?’

‗I said that it could not be otherwise, surely. He walked on, muttering to himself. ‘Sí, sí, without doubt, without doubt; and, look you, Señor Martin, what it is to be well spoken of! There is not another man that could have been even thought of for such a thing. I shall get something great for it some day. And let it come soon,’ he mumbled. ‘Time passes in this country as quick as anywhere else.’‖\textsuperscript{107}

Nostromo believes that being “spoken well of” is a reward for his good deeds; however, in reality, the contrary is true: he himself will inevitably become a “gift” for the Other as in death the Other confers meaning onto life. And Nostromo does indeed embrace his attention and no official recording, were somehow unthinkable and without sufficient authority.” Said, \emph{Beginnings}, 100.

\textsuperscript{105} F. R. Leavis, \emph{The Great Tradition}, 230.

\textsuperscript{106} This separation of Nostromo from the meaning of his life is also intimated by Said who claims that “[Nostromo] lives \textit{outside} his fame, which to our eyes seems a thing apart from him, as if a great public reputation possessed its own authority. The man and his reputation have become completely distinct.” Said, \emph{Beginnings}, 101. Nostromo’s reputation \textit{is} his meaning—a meaning that has been alienated from Nostromo.

\textsuperscript{107} Conrad, \emph{Nostromo}, 196.
death, he desires death, as is understood by the emphasis he places on what he believes will be his last great act: saving the silver of the San Tomé mine from the insurgent Sotillo. To save the silver he must transport it on a lighter to the Isabels and bury it in the foothills, a most fatal venture. Nostromo says of this act: “I am going to make it the most famous and desperate affair of my life. . . . It shall be talked about when the little children are grown up and the grown men are old.” But, again it is Decoud who best summarises Nostromo’s desires: “Here was a man . . . that seemed as though he would have preferred to die rather than deface the perfect form of his egoism.” Nostromo’s mission to save the silver is to be the culminating event of his life of prestige and remembrance; and it is to be the finale of a life lived in favour of others. This is the tragic absurdity of Nostromo’s project.

And it is this tragedy which is also emphasised by the ironic mode of Nostromo. This emphasis is evidenced in the discursive beginning of Nostromo when, in one of the first incidents of the NOW-story, the first “contrary” voice to Nostromo’s reputation is heard—a voice which, like that of the narrator, is heard before the voice of Nostromo is first heard. It is here that the reader first hears a conflicting opinion of Nostromo’s intentions to those of the narrator—the “authoritative” spokesperson for the people of Sulaco. This event takes place during one of the frequent revolutions of Sulaco, at the casa Viola, home to Old Giorgio, his wife, Signora Teresa, and their two daughters, Linda and Giselle. Barricaded in their home, and sensing the imminent danger of their predicament, Signora Teresa begins to moan: “Oh! Gian’ Battista, why art thou not here? Oh! why art thou not here?” Her husband reprimands his wife:

“Peace, woman! Where’s the sense of it? There’s his duty,” he murmured in the dark; and she would retort, panting—

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108 Ibid., 209.
109 Ibid., 239.
110 Ibid., 15.
"Eh! I have no patience. Duty! What of the woman who has been like a mother to him? I bent my knee to him this morning; don’t you go out, Gian’ Battista—stop in the house, Battistino—look at those two little innocent children!"  

And yet Nostromo (whom the Viola’s believe, because of his reputation, will save them) does not come, prompting Signora Teresa to declare: “I know him. He thinks of nobody but himself.” Signora Teresa makes the first disparaging remarks against the reputation of Nostromo (seemingly a singular opinion), casting doubt on the “success” of his intentions. However, contrary to Signora Teresa’s claims, the omniscient narrator tells the reader: “All the morning Nostromo had kept his eye from afar on the Casa Viola, even in the thick of the hottest scrimmage near the Custom House.” When chance permits, Nostromo arrives with a shout and a shot from his revolver:

His voice had penetrated to them, sounding breathlessly hurried, “Hola! Vecchio! O, Vecchio! Is it all well with you in there?”

“You see—” murmured old Viola to his wife.

Signora Teresa was silent now. Outside Nostromo laughed.

“I can hear the padrona is not dead.”

“You have done your best to kill me with fear,” cried Signora Teresa. She wanted to say something more, but her voice failed her.

Linda raised her eyes to her face for a moment, but old Giorgio shouted apologetically—

“She is a little upset.”

Outside Nostromo shouted back with another laugh—

“She cannot upset me.”

Signora Teresa found her voice.

“It is what I say. You have no heart—and you have no conscience, Gian’ Battista—"

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111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., 18.
113 Although, as we soon find, a similar opinion is held by Dr. Monygham who has “an immense mistrust of mankind.” Ibid., 36.
They heard him wheel his horse away from the shutters. The party he led were babbling excitedly in Italian and Spanish, inciting each other to the pursuit. He put himself at their head, crying, “Avanti!”

“He has not stopped very long with us. There is no praise from strangers to be got here,” Signora Teresa said tragically. “Avanti! Yes! That is all he cares for. To be first somewhere—somehow—to be first with these English. They will be showing him to everybody. ‘This is our Nostromo!’” She laughed ominously. “What a name! What is that? Nostromo? He would take a name that is properly no word from them.”

The omniscient narrator maintains Nostromo’s reputation; and yet, in this passage, Signora Teresa’s disparaging voice is again heard. This is significant as it enables her to illuminate two important aspects of Nostromo’s character: the first is that Nostromo is not altruistic as his brave actions are done not to aid those in trouble but to earn him praise; and secondly, that the name Nostromo was given to him by Captain Mitchell. The latter is significant if we consider that the name Nostromo is a corruption of the two Italian phrases, nostro uomo, which means “our man,” and il nostromo, which in galley terminology refers to a “boatswain.” For Captain Mitchell and the English/Europeans, who have come to mine the silver of the San Tomé mine, Nostromo is “their man”—Nostromo belongs to them such that he is no longer a “being-with” others but a “being-for-others.” Indeed, he is well spoken of in the sense that one speaks well of a fine piece of machinery, which is to say that his value is the same as that which is attributed to material things; and so too is Nostromo a commodity. He is an invaluable fellow, but invaluable for others. Indeed, Captain Mitchell even boasts of his discovery of Nostromo and also states: “The fellow is devoted to me, body and soul!” Here, Nostromo’s value rests on his unquestioned loyalty to Captain Mitchell. What is more, Captain Mitchell “lends” Nostromo to others including the Engineer who similarly describes Nostromo as “a most useful fellow, lent me by Captain Mitchell of the O. S.

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114 Ibid., 19.
115 Ibid., 19–20.
117 Conrad, Nostromo, 36.
N. Company. It was very good of Mitchell. Charles Gould told me I couldn’t do better than take advantage of the offer.”\(^{118}\) Nostromo does not exist as a being for-itself but exists as a being in-itself. His life is a meaningless life, lived in bad-faith. But, again, Nostromo seemingly embraces becoming an object for others and embraces a loss of individuality and subjectivity of meaning.

Unlike the story of Anna Karenina, Nostromo does not have an “immediate,” secondary existential beginning which effects a change in his understanding of the meaning of his past. Indeed, what can be interpreted by the reader as being the “static” meaninglessness of Nostromo’s past life is maintained for a great part of the novel’s discourse. Nostromo *accumulates* the events of his life—he is almost monomaniacal as he does not change the direction of the action of his story or the novel’s story. More importantly the events of his life seemingly involve no real choice—his choices are predetermined by his reputation. This is evidenced by the event following Nostromo’s being asked to undertake the mission to save the silver of the mine, when Signora Teresa (who has become very ill and whose death is imminent) begs Nostromo to fetch her a priest. Here, Nostromo is faced with a choice which, in itself, can be seen as a significant kernel event of Nostromo’s story, particularly because he is confronted with a choice to either maintain his chosen project (his reputation) or fetch a priest for Teresa. For Nostromo, however, the choice is no choice at all: he refuses to fetch a priest readily and without question or deliberation—his mind is already made up, thereby diffusing the event as a kernel or as a branch of possibilities and new beginnings. Indeed, it is *because* of his reputation that Nostromo must undertake this project: his reputation determines his choice, such that the mission of saving the silver of the mine was inevitable. Moreover, his act of saving the silver will assumedly be praised by many; in contrast, the choice to help a dying woman, whose singular, lonely voice of praise will soon be silenced by her death, would not elicit the same wealth of praise. Indeed, to invert the proverb “Of the dead, speak no ill,” it is in Nostromo’s interest that “the *dead* speak no ill.” The implication of maintaining the stasis of

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 35.
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Nostromo’s past by accumulating these events within the NOW-story is that, unlike Anna Karenina’s past choices, Nostromo’s past choices have corporeal conviction as we hear and see the present events of the NOW-story as they occur within the pages. This is to say that unlike Anna’s past choices, Nostromo’s undiscoursed past choices become more credible and believable. Only after Nostromo saves the silver does he experience what can be described as an existential beginning, an Augenblick, which, as will be described in the following chapter, is analogous to the “middle” event of the Aristotelian plot.

**Seriousness and Secondary Existential Beginnings**

It would be difficult to make any definitive generalisations from the examples discussed above of the meaning of the different combinations of beginnings; however, one broad generalisation which can be tentatively made is that there is a historical trend of a movement away from the coinciding of the discursive beginning of the story with the biological beginning of character, to discursive beginnings which begin after a character’s formative years or after a character’s first existential beginning. This is particularly evident in the late-Victorian novels and the modernist novel where the secondary Augenblicke of a character’s life is often the primary event/action of the story. Indeed, the stories of the novels of the late Victorians often begin in the characters’ adulthood and concerned itself with adulthood. This can also be said to represent an increase in the “seriousness” of the late Victorian novel, particularly in terms of its themes and questions, and its examination of the more serious problems of “adult” life. In *The English Novel* Walter Allen claims that English writers such as George Eliot and European writers such as Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy wrote with far greater intent and seriousness. Allen argues that Dostoyevsky especially reflected this seriousness:

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Dostoyevsky, with his tremendous subject-matter of man in relation to God, is plainly using the novel with a depth of seriousness quite beyond anything the early Victorians proposed for it.

The seriousness of these European writers was both moral and aesthetic; it is not always a simple matter to distinguish one from the other.  

One need only look to Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment* to understand the seriousness alluded to by Allen. Indeed, in the latter, the reader is immediately thrown into a dire situation, when, in the first few pages, Raskolnikoff, who is contemplating murdering Alena Ivanovna (the woman he is in debt to), asks himself: “Can I really be capable of *that*?” Raskolnikoff recognises the severity of his possible actions but also the implications of his choices. In contrast, some of the novels of writers such as Charles Dickens often lack this depth of existential seriousness. As F. R. Leavis says of Dickens in *The Great Tradition*:

That Dickens was a great genius and is permanently among the classics is certain. But the genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description suggests. Praising him magnificently in *Soliloquies in England*, Santayana, in concluding, says: “In every English-speaking home, in the four quarters of the globe, parents and children would do well to read Dickens aloud of a winter’s evening.” This note is right and significant. The adult mind doesn’t as a rule find in Dickens a challenge to an unusual and sustained seriousness.

Leavis’s (clearly biased) opinion is that the shivering reader is looking to adult characters to help understand the problems and questions of the meaning of life. Only characters that have experienced “true” beginnings, whose lives have become

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120 Ibid.
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problematic, and who reflect the same questions and anxieties of the shivering reader are valuable to the shivering reader.\textsuperscript{123} From the examples discussed above, we find a particular lack of seriousness in the trivial stories of \textit{Lazarillo De Tormes} and \textit{Moll Flanders}. Indeed, the \textit{Augenblick} of Jane Eyre also lacks a sense of seriousness. Franco Moretti goes so far as to question whether \textit{Jane Eyre} and \textit{Great Expectations} are essentially fairy tales, citing Bruno Bettelheim's definition of the fairy tale as “[beginning] with the hero at the mercy of those who think little of him and his abilities, who mistreat him and even threaten his life . . .” Moretti claims that “this is the basic predicament (if not always the starting point) of every protagonist of the English \textit{Bildungsroman}.”\textsuperscript{124} Jane Eyre is the exemplar \textit{Bildungsroman} protagonist as she is, from the very beginning, at the mercy of her Aunt Reed and her cousins. Indeed, this same starting point is essentially repeated over and over in the picaresque novel, such that each episode begins at a terrible starting point. What is more, \textit{Jane Eyre} and \textit{Great Expectations} are characterised by extreme paradigmatic oppositions such as good and evil—characteristics which dominate a child’s mind and which are also particular to the fairy tale:

Childlike, and fairy-tale-like, is the belief that such a judgment [of right and wrong] can be made \textit{always} and \textit{everywhere}; that it is, in the end, the \textit{only} meaningful type of judgment. When this happens—as it does in these fairy-tale novels [such as \textit{Jane Eyre} and \textit{Great Expectations]}—the standards of common morality invade every page and every action: the world has meaning \textit{only if} it is relentlessly divided into good and evil.\textsuperscript{125}

Whether or not these novels can be regarded as fairy tales, it can be said that their stories and characters lack a certain “depth”—a certain seriousness and intensity desired by the “adult,” shivering reader, particularly in terms of the choices that the

\textsuperscript{123} Indeed, childhood \textit{may be} the most meaningful time of our lives, as is somewhat implied by the explicit revelations of Citizen Kane, discussed in chapter two, above. However, it must be recognised that it is to an “adult Kane”—the Kane with life-experience—that the meaningfulness of childhood is revealed, not the “child Kane.”

\textsuperscript{124} Moretti, \textit{The Way of the World}, 185–86.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 187.
characters make as they do not carry the weight of consequence of action or the weight of consciousness of the facticity of death. Compare the existential beginnings of Stan Parker who is anxiously facing an unknown future; consider the suicidal tendencies of Ishmael prompting him towards an existential beginning; consider the repercussions of Anna Karenina’s existential beginning, such as her exclusion from society and her tragic death; and consider the fatalistic nature of Nostromo’s “most desperate affair.” These examples are valuable to the shivering reader purely because, for the shivering reader, the question of the meaning of life is a serious matter and should be treated as such. Indeed, for Albert Camus, understanding the question of the meaning of life is a matter of life and death—the existentially anxious reader is, for Camus, essentially a “suicidal” reader.

But an even more poignant reason why the youth of fictional characters in the modernist novel is elided, and the Augenblicke of adult life becomes a more prominent focus of the story, is the aftermath of the Great War. As Moretti describes:

If one wonders about the disappearance of the novel of youth, then, the youth of 1919—maimed, shocked, speechless, decimated—provide quite a clear answer. We tend to see social and political history as a creative influence on literary evolution, yet its destructive role may be just as relevant. If history can make cultural forms necessary, it can make them impossible as well, and this is what the war did to the Bildungsroman.126

The Great War changed all and instead of creating a possibility of new beginnings—new individual experiences and existence—it shattered them; the becoming of individuality—of maturity and adulthood—felt tainted and unfulfilled and could no longer be written.

126 Ibid., 229.
The novels examined thus far have all exhibited Kermode’s plot structure of *tick-tock* inasmuch as the beginning (the *tick*) creates the expectation of an ending (the *tock*). These novels are essentially realist in their structure and thus conform to this simple model. However, as was described above, Docherty and Heise both argue that this is not applicable to modern or postmodern fiction, and, indeed, the narrative blocks of beginnings, middles, and ends are very difficult to isolate or embed in a “geometric” structure. As Docherty writes, this is especially the case for postmodern fictions:

Instead of the “open-ended” fiction which begs for its completion or closure by the reader, we have an “open-beginning” fiction, which demands not closure, but rather a discontinuous series of re-beginnings on the part of the reader. As such, the reader is not allowed to rest in one single completed interpretation of the fiction; instead, the reading subject is placed in a position of subjectivity from which to inaugurate new beginnings. In terms of “character,” the reader may not rest in one meaningful description of the “characters” of the text, but must intersubjectively inaugurate with them new beginnings of his or her own subjectivity. Here, the complementary “tock” to Kermode’s “tick” never appears. . . . There is no “sense of an ending,” for there is no ending, only beginnings.127

To illustrate Docherty’s claims we can look to the “postmodern” literature of the absurd which has its foundations in Samuel Beckett and the French Theatre of the Absurd, and in other post-World War II American writers, such as Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, and John Barth.128 Absurdist fiction is especially pertinent for the present argument as both existentialists and absurdist share the same understanding of the principles of the absurdity of the human situation; they differ, however, in their approach to the “aftermath” of the recognition of this absurdity, specifically in relation to the freedom and possibilities of the individual: where the existentialists strive “against”

absurdity by choosing meaningful projects (which have existential beginnings) and endeavour to make their lives meaningful in the face of meaninglessness, the absurdists' task is to dramatise the absurdity of life and emphasise the fact that our existence is doomed to failure. Further, absurdists dramatise the limits of our freedom, and, particularly through the use of black humour, reflect the grim and pathetic way in which we hold on to our sense of freedom. Indeed, this contrast of existential and absurdist thinking is also useful to illustrate the value of realist fiction (what we may call existential fiction) to the shivering reader as opposed to some early postmodern (absurd) fiction.

The absurdist's understanding of beginnings is exemplified in the novels of Thomas Pynchon, particularly *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Pynchon's novels do not exhibit the realist novel's geometric structure; instead, they are structured such that there are only “beginnings” (a sequence of ticks) with no real endings, such that they purposefully frustrate the expectations of the reader. We see this in the story of Oedipa Maas—the unwitting executrix of the estate of Pierce Inverarity—in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. What proceeds is a very mysterious journey, which may or may not have been invented by Oedipa's paranoia. As Tony Thwaites explains, Oedipa's story is based on false starts and flawed beginnings:

At the very beginning of the text, there is a suspension, the enigma of the title: *The Crying of Lot 49*. Follow the course of the plot, or at least the regular process of a line of type through the volume, and at the very end of the text the enigma is repeated: “Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49.” Not resolved, but repeated, and even complicated in this repetition. . . . Instead of being a passage between a question and its answer—endpoints of a single trajectory, which is the parabola of the Same's gravity—the plot is an eddy where every point sinks, is lost, returns newly problematised in difference at every turn. . . . There are no answers, only multiplications of the problem in a resonating network of repetitions, each affirming all the others, and all affirming that plot

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which separates them and yet binds them as that increasingly impossible and desperate hypothesis, the Tristero. Here everything is all false starts and false endings which bottom out.\textsuperscript{130}

What the reader finds in Oedipa is paranoia and delusion and flawed plotting. This is not to say that Oedipa’s paranoia is not justified,\textsuperscript{131} and it not to say that she does not have a meaningful project of sorts: she is trying to solve the mystery of the Tristero, and she undertakes this project relentlessly, seriously. But the mystery remains unsolved—undetermined, open. And, thus, the reader finds in Oedipa an emptiness—an absence of wisdom. This is not to say that Oedipa is not “wise”—it is to say that she does not “experience” the revelation of closure and endings, and therefore cannot impart these revelations to the reader. This is similar to many characters of the absurd; and it is because of this, it can be argued that the literature of the absurd in a sense takes to the extreme a lack of counsel for the shivering reader—counsel which Benjamin claims was once offered by the pre-modern storyteller, and sought by the modern reader. The texts may be considered aesthetically “valuable,” and they are unquestionably very important literary works, but they lack the value of revelatory wisdom expected and yielded from novels such as those of the realist tradition.

Pynchon’s \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} similarly denies the reader wisdom, and serves only to reinforce the sense of the unknown and unknowable. This stems from the lack of closure, or, as Heise comments, from the “indeterminacy” of \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}:

As the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult for both characters and readers to construct any plot pattern or underlying meaning for the phenomena they are confronted with. This indeterminacy is not settled or clarified even by the ending of the novel: quite literally, \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} is a novel whose plot gradually vanishes,

\textsuperscript{130}Thwaites, “Miracles,” 270–71.
\textsuperscript{131}Leo Bersani makes a similar claim about \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}: “All the paranoid thinking in the novel is probably justified, and therefore—at least in the traditional sense of the word—really not paranoid at all. I say ‘probably’ because Pynchon is less interested in vindicating his characters’ suspicions of plots than in universalising and depathologising the paranoid structure of thought.” Bersani, “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature,” 101.
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disintegrating into a multitude of episodes and characters that might or might not be
connected with each other. ¹³²

In *Gravity’s Rainbow* personal narratives are void of endings and closure and thus
deny the reader meaningful revelations, which, again, are expected by the shivering
reader.

The denial of endings and closure is also a major theme in Laurence Sterne’s
*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*—
two novels which exhibit many of the hallmarks of postmodern fiction. The desires and
expectations of the shivering reader are constantly frustrated by the disruptions and
interruptions within the two texts. Indeed, like *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Tristram Shandy*
does not really have a beginning, but many beginnings, none of which are really
“existential,” and none of which ever really begins in the first place. Instead, these
beginnings are continually interrupted and frustrated, such that the writing strategy of
*Tristram Shandy* can be described as “retardation through incompletion”:

> At all levels of *Tristram Shandy*, nothing is completed. Walter’s encyclopaedia is never
written. The novel begins with a description of the coitus interruptus which brings Tristram
into the world. The central narrative is never finished because it is continually punctuated
by descriptions of events whose relevance to the main story is apparent only to Tristram
himself. ¹³³

The consequence of the incompletion of the many beginnings of *Tristram Shandy* is
that it also frustrates the reader’s sense of closure in the novel for there is no *tock* to
complete *tick* of *tick-tock*. The novel cannot provide the shivering reader with warmth
through closure.

We find a similar method of frustration of expectation in *Midnight’s Children*: the
fictional author Saleem Sinai intersperses his story with discussions on the physical

¹³² Heise, “*Gravity’s Rainbow,*” 929.
process of writing his story—discussions which are comically illuminated by his first respondent Padma and her intermittent interruptions. The shivering reader of *Midnight’s Children* is reflected in Padma: she wants a simple, autobiographical story, which is both linear and causal—a story from “the universe of what-happened-next.” And she also wants a singular, identifiable, personal narrative, structured by its meaningful events—the choices of meaningful projects, and actions which create the intended meaning of these projects. But despite Padma’s cajoling of Saleem to “get a move on,” he cannot satisfy this desire: he must write multiple plots, multiple histories. Indeed, as Saleem explicitly states: “I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well.” There is always more to his story as all his and others stories “leak” into each other. They cannot be separated, but are interwoven and intertextual, creating no coherence or unity. And so the shivering reader’s and Padma’s desires and expectations must remain incomplete and frustrated.

Another important recurring theme of postmodern literature, which undermines its value to the shivering reader relates to the narrator’s method of introducing and naming characters, which, as has been discussed, is very important for beginning the character’s existence: the giving of a proper name to a character instantiates the existential beginning of the character and initiates the beginning of meaning. Further, the character’s name, once instantiated, is expected to be maintained throughout the text, thereby uniting the identity and the wholeness of the character. However, in postmodern fiction, this is not necessarily the case. As was described above in the discussion on the ethics of alterity, postmodern fiction endeavours to undermine the unity and fixed identity of its characters. The identity of characters purposefully shifts—an effect which is achieved through various narrative techniques such as the repetition of names for different characters, or by giving a single character a number of pseudonyms. As such, the shivering reader cannot pin down and derive meaning from

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the manifold identities of the “individual” character. A similar problem occurs for the reader of Nathalie Sarraute’s fiction, notably in *Tropisms* (1939)—a book which is made up of a “series of moments” and in which no proper names are given to the characters. As Docherty writes: “[Sarraute] sees only the name’s quality as a label, and therefore thinks of it as in some way fixative upon her characters and their freedom, and by implication their life, or lifelikeness.” Here we are reminded of Sartre’s claim that “so long as I live, I can give the lie to what others discover in me.” If you cannot name a character then you cannot give that character a fixed meaning. However, what Sarraute’s technique does by avoiding the pinning down of a character’s identity is undermine the shivering reader’s expectations as he or she cannot assume that the unity of a character’s identity exists. More importantly, it disrupts the connection of the existential beginning of a meaningful life to the revelatory ending of that life. This is an unwelcome disruption for the shivering reader as he or she is looking to characters for wisdom and instruction; the shivering reader is looking to complete and meaningful characters for warmth, which is made possible by the realists’ representation of their characters’ meaningful projections and revelations which are united by the characters’ singular identities.

It is also in a more recent postmodern novel—Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007)—that we find an alternative purpose for the technique of external focalisation where a character is unnamed for a period and his or her identity is problematic—a technique used to great effect in White’s *The Tree of Man* for emphasising Stan Parker’s existential beginning. DeLillo’s novel begins with the story of Keith Neudecker—a lawyer who was working in the northern tower of the World Trade Center when the 9/11 attacks happened. In the first chapter, Keith is not named: we are only introduced to an anonymous man emerging from the rubble of the fallen Twin Towers:

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It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads. They had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths. They had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him. . . .

He wore a suit and carried a briefcase. There was glass in his hair and face, marbled balls of blood and light. He walked past a Breakfast Special sign and they went running by, city cops and security guards running, hands pressed down on gun butts to keep the weapons steady. 139

The man remains unnamed throughout the first chapter and only in the second chapter does his identity begin to emerge (even then indirectly) through the dialogue of other characters, notably his estranged wife Lianne and her mother. What is significant about this example is it appears to be the reverse of an existential beginning: it is a disintegration of identity. Indeed, Keith has children, is divorced, has a job, and he has character traits—he has a "meaningful" life that we can assume he has created. But as he walks away from the rubble, the shell-shocked Keith is drawn towards his estranged wife’s apartment—he “regresses” to his past life and past identity. Here, however, Keith’s loss of identity symbolises much more than one individual’s existence, one man’s story: it symbolises a loss of “identity” for America—the “disconnect between America’s self-image and its image in the eyes of the world.” 140 It is a novel in which all the characters’ identities begin to disintegrate:

Falling Man describes numerous psychic projections and identifications. But in the novel, everyone is falling. All identities are either confused (Keith’s son thinks bin Laden’s name is Bill Lawton) or double (Martin Ridnour is Ernst Hechinger) or merging (Hammad with Atta) or failing (the Alzheimer’s patients; Lianne’s father and mother). 141

138 Docherty, Reading (Absent) Character, 66.
139 DeLillo, Falling Man, 3.
140 Kaufmann, "The Wake of Terror,” 353.
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The 9/11 attacks also mark an end of progression, of a future—a claim which is somewhat evidenced in a conversation between Lianne and her mother:

“What's next? Don't you ask yourself? Not only next month. Years to come.”

“Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next. Eight years ago they planted a bomb in one of the towers. Nobody said what's next. This was next. The time to be afraid is when there's no reason to be afraid. Too late now.”

The future has become an unknown and the idea of plot has collapsed. One cannot predict what is next as there is no “next.” Moreover, one cannot expect the tock of tick-tock because both the ticks of the metanarrative of progression (a “big” narrative) and the projection of Keith's life (a “little” narrative) appear static, deferred, even regressive. Again this undermines the shivering reader's desire for unity and meaning and merely reaffirms the shivering reader's anxiety about his or her own meaning.

We have seen how the novels of differing periods of fiction begin in a variety of ways. However, with the exception of postmodern novels such as those of Sterne, Pynchon, Rushdie, and DeLillo, where beginnings are indeterminate and problematic, what these novels each have in common is a clearly identifiable middle—the part of the story which follows the “first” beginning and which is essentially the greater discursive “volume” of the realist novel. Indeed, we can ask what the future will hold for Jane Eyre and Moll Flanders after their respective existential beginnings just as we can ask what the future will hold for Nostromo, Anna Karenina, Ishmael, and Stan Parker after their respective existential beginnings. Each character must continue to choose and act regardless of their choices—their discursive beginnings. In the following chapter we will examine the structure of “middles” in terms of these future choices and actions which comprise the middle of the novel and how they inevitably lead to the revealed meaning of the characters' lives—the end of their personal narratives. We will also examine how

141 Ibid., 371.
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these choices and actions create and *shape* the meaning of the characters’ lives. And we will also consider how the characters’ choices and actions, and the rhetoric of the novelists’ choice to include or exclude the characters’ choices and actions, also shape the reader’s evaluation of the characters’ meanings.

142 DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 10.
The Middle as the Shaping of Meaning

Since freedom is a being-without-support and without-a-springboard, the project in order to be must be constantly renewed.
—Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

If the incidents of our biological birth and biological death are the first and last events of our lives—the beginning and the end of our lives—then the greater temporal volume of our lives is the duration between these boundaries—the middle part, the period in which we live and exist for the most part. However, as was suggested above, the middle of our personal narratives does not begin with our biological birth but begins at, or a moment after, our *first existential beginning*—our “true” beginning—and ends at the moment—the event—of our death.¹ The middle begins when the basic path of our intended meaningful projects has been chosen and clearly (or vaguely) mapped out and the first anxious steps are made to create this intended meaning. But, as has been described in the “Introduction” above, the freedom to create our life’s meaning does not necessarily give meaning to our lives. As Jean-Paul Sartre claims, our intended meaningful projects only attain their meaning through a future end. The first choice of a meaningful project does not create meaning—it is a projection and we must move towards meaning; to choose is to set a meaningful project in motion towards revelation. But if we are condemned to choose, then we are also condemned to continually

¹ For the present discussion the “end” of the *middle* is essentially death.
choose our meaningful projects. Only by continually choosing our projects and actions can we successfully create and achieve the intended meaning of our projects. What this further suggests is that we are not compelled to continually choose this initial, intended meaning inasmuch as our past choices do not make either our present or future choices necessary—our past projects do not dictate our present or future projects. Indeed, the middle of our lives is not homogenised or uniform—one choice does not yield a clear, definitive meaning. The meanings of our choices are uncertain until they are revealed. Moreover, our choices are contingent: our chosen projects may come to an end (willingly or unwillingly, successfully or not) and new choices of projects, new beginnings, are necessarily made. Once again, the example of the character of Anna Karenina best illustrates this contingency of choice and intention: Anna negates her past, intended project (she ends her marriage to Karenin) and begins a new project (her new life with Vronsky). Like Anna, we too have the freedom to negate our past, and we too are free to choose new, meaningful projects. Indeed, we may “come up for air” in the midst of our projects and pause to survey the direction and the meaningfulness of our projects; survey where we have been and where we are going. This is also to say that we may find opportunity to summon ourselves from our everyday mode of inauthenticity—the everydayness of our lives and our projects—such that we can authentically re-evaluate our situation. Anna Karenina dwells in the inauthentic everydayness of her loveless marriage with Karenin and it takes her encounter with Vronsky to rouse her from this everydayness such that she begins to authentically see the meaninglessness of her past life and consequently choose a new beginning. These claims are again very similar to Nietzsche’s claim that in order to see ourselves as heroes we must distance ourselves from what is closest at hand—the foreground—and see the larger picture—the meaning of our whole lives and not merely the immediate. In the same way we must distance ourselves to see if the hero we are becoming is indeed the hero we intend to become. Thus, we can say that the middle of
our personal narratives is an existence in continual flux between authenticity and
inauthenticity, between reflection and choice and action.²

But to say that we may choose new, secondary beginnings does not negate or
diminish the claim that a meaningful life comes from a whole life, nor does it
necessarily affirm the postmodern understanding of the contingency of identity and
meaning. Once again we are reminded of David Cooper’s claim that “a heroic
martyrdom [cannot] turn an otherwise worthless existence into a triumphant one”; nor
does a new meaningful beginning, in its negation or supersession of past beginnings,
make a whole life meaningful. The middle of our personal narratives is comprised of all
our new choices and new beginnings, including all of our lesser choices and projects. It
is the combination of both the major and minor choices and projects—the kernel and
satellite events of our personal narratives—that comprise the whole of our lives and
give shape to our whole lives. This is also to say that the middle is comprised of all our
contingent identities which combine to create a unified, whole and meaningful identity
which, as Benjamin claims, is revealed only in dying.

_Middles and Fiction_

How then do we describe the middle of the fictional plot? As we have done in previous
chapters, we can begin by again looking at Aristotle’s definition of plot, more
specifically his definition of the complex plot which “is symbolised schematically by a
line that abruptly changes direction.”³ This abrupt change is essentially the middle of
the complex plot and is the result of an incident which is either a reversal (peripeteia),
or a recognition (anagnorisis). As O. B. Hardison explains:

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² As was described above, the reader of the novel is also in a perennial flux between
authenticity and inauthenticity insofar as the novel “summons” the reader from the inauthenticity
of his or her immersion in the novel, such that they authentically reflect upon their own
meaningful choices and actions.
³ Hardison, _Aristotle’s Poetics_, 165.
The Middle as the Shaping of Meaning

Reversal is a relatively simple concept. It is "a change of fortune in the action of the play to the opposite state of affairs." An action seems to be proceeding toward success and suddenly veers off in the direction of misfortune. We can call this type of plot "fatal-complex." . . . Alternately, an action seems to be proceeding toward misfortune and suddenly veers off in the direction of happiness. This type of plot is "fortunate-complex." . . .

"Recognition" is a more difficult concept. The introductory definition is fairly broad. It is "a change from ignorance to knowledge"; it results in "friendship or . . . hostility" between agents involved in an action; and it is "most effective" when it is closely related to a reversal.4

The story of the character Nostromo exemplifies the Aristotelian complex plot insofar as the "middle," or, better, the middle narrative block, culminates at an event which is both a reversal and a discovery or self-recognition. This event immediately follows Nostromo's successful mission to save the silver of the mine—his "most desperate affair." As the story goes, Nostromo and Decoud (who has accompanied Nostromo on the mission) succeed in making it to the Isabels alive and manage to hide the silver in its foothills; however, the story told to the insurgent Sotillo by Hirsch (a stowaway on the lighter) is that Nostromo and Decoud have both drowned in a collision with another vessel, and that the silver has been lost to the sea—a story which soon dissipates across the wider community. That Nostromo is assumed to be dead is significant for several reasons. The first is the confirmation of Nostromo's "value" to the Europeans: Captain Mitchell's first thoughts upon hearing of Nostromo's death are that "now in all the future days he would be deprived of the invaluable services of his Capataz."5 In a similar fashion, Charles Gould's first reaction is that if the Capataz was alive then he would be the best man to complete a mission to save the mine. Even in death, Nostromo is still thought of as a commodity, as an object, and not as a man capable of sympathy. However, it is comments such as these which reveal the second significant

4 Ibid., 168.
5 Conrad, Nostromo, 273.
implication of Nostromo’s supposed death, namely that, despite the “abject” nature of these comments, Nostromo’s supposed death has essentially fulfilled his desire of “being spoken well of.” He has “succeeded” in creating his intended, meaningful project. Ironically, however, when Nostromo returns to Sulaco to enjoy his success he quickly discovers that it is not what he had anticipated:

[Nostromo’s] vanity was infinitely and naively greedy . . . [He] led a public life in his sphere. It became necessary to him. It was the very breath of his nostrils. . . . Without it he would have been nothing. . . . The Capataz of the Sulaco Cargadores had lived in splendour and publicity up to the very moment, as it were, when he took charge of the lighter containing the treasure in silver ingots. The last act he had performed in Sulaco was in complete harmony with his vanity, and as such perfectly genuine. He had given his last dollar to an old woman moaning with the grief and fatigue of a dismal search under the arch of the ancient gate. Performed in obscurity and without witnesses, it had still the characteristics of splendour and publicity, and was in strict keeping with his reputation. But this awakening, in solitude, . . . had no such characteristics. His first confused feeling was exactly this—that it was not in keeping. It was more like the end of things. The necessity of living concealed somehow, for God knows how long, which assailed him on his return to consciousness, made everything that had gone before for years appear vain and foolish, like a flattering dream come to an end.

. . . He remained rich in glory and reputation. But since it was no longer possible for him to parade the streets of the town, and be hailed with respect in the usual haunts of his leisure, this sailor felt destitute indeed.\(^6\)

Nostromo’s reward has come but it is not as he had wished it: he is a fugitive, and must avoid being recognised; thus he can no longer enjoy the praise of others, just as he would not be able to enjoy their praise in death. He sees that the values of reputation and reverence are meaningless without being amongst those whom revere him. And for this he feels betrayed:

\(^6\) Ibid., 325–27.
The Middle as the Shaping of Meaning

No one waited for him; no one thought of him; no one expected or wished his return. “Betrayed! Betrayed!” he muttered to himself. No one cared. He might have been drowned by this time. No one would have cared—unless, perhaps, the children, he thought to himself. But they were with the English signora, and not thinking of him at all.\(^7\)

Here we see that Nostromo desires not only the prestige of reputation but to also be cared for and loved. And Nostromo realises that he has failed in achieving both of these desires. Nostromo’s despair is further compounded when he discovers that his most “desperate” affair was \textit{not} considered desperate at all by the Europeans, as they readily gave in to the demands of Sotillo. Indeed, when Nostromo again meets Dr. Monygham, the doctor does not even inquire about the “most desperate undertaking of his life.”\(^8\) In Nostromo’s mind, the doctor voices the opinion of all the Europeans of Sulaco and also illuminates the harsh reality of the absurdity that Nostromo’s life has suddenly become. It is this moment which is essentially the \textit{discovery}—the middle part—of \textit{Nostromo}. As Northrop Frye describes:

\begin{quote}
The discovery or \textit{anagnorisis} which comes at the end of the tragic plot is not simply the knowledge by the hero of what has happened to him . . . but the recognition of the determined shape of the life he has created for himself, with an implicit comparison with the uncreated potential life he has forsaken.\(^9\)
\end{quote}

Frye correctly states that the discovery comes at the end of the plot; however, as Hardison suggests, the self-discovery can appear in the middle section of the complex plot but only if it is “followed by at least one other incident defining a new sequence.”\(^10\) It is from this definition that we find a distinct similarity to the self-discovery of Nostromo as Nostromo recognises the meaninglessness of the past he has created from his

\(^7\) Ibid., 333.
\(^8\) Ibid., 337.
\(^9\) Frye, \textit{Anatomy of Criticism}, 212.
\(^10\) Hardison, \textit{Aristotle’s Poetics}, 169. See also notes in chapter four, above.
intended project: he is not rewarded for his good deeds, his menial style of living, or for his generosity. Because of this, he must begin a new “sequence,” make a new choice, and, indeed, he does choose a new project.

This moment in Nostromo’s life can also be described as both an Augenblick, and as a moment much like the interval between tock-tick. The former is illustrated when we contrast Nostromo’s experience of his discovery with Frye’s description of the Augenblick of tragedy:

Tragedy seems to move up to an Augenblick or crucial moment from which point the road to what might have been and the road to what will be can be simultaneously seen. Seen by the audience, that is: it cannot be seen by the hero if he is in a state of hybris, for in that case the crucial moment is for him a moment of dizziness, when the wheel of fortune begins its inevitable cyclical movement downward.¹¹

When Nostromo returns to Sulaco he is in a state of hubris, but his discovery soon becomes a vertiginous moment. It is a dizziness which is both confusing and abject; his solitude and destitution do not make sense to Nostromo; and the ground beneath his feet falls away.

This description is also very similar to the interval between tock-tick which, as Kermode describes, lacks form, is disorganised, and cannot be properly grasped.¹²

This is not to say that the plot is like that of the postmodern plot, but is more like a tick-tock-tick-tock plot. From his destitution—the silent, empty interval between tock-tick—Nostromo must choose a new existential beginning, a new tick, as the choices of his past are now determined—the tock of the initial tick–tock has been “heard.” And it is here that the first significant kernel event of the novel, and in Nostromo’s personal narrative, occurs: Nostromo realises that his past is meaningless, and that he must now choose a new meaningful project. And it is in his choosing of a new meaningful project that the first evidence of a reversal in Nostromo takes place: his choice to

¹¹ Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, 213.
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undertake the dangerous mission of carrying a message to General Barrios (a commander in the Sulaco military) asking him to return with his troops and save Sulaco. Nostromo accepts this mission not out of loyalty to the Europeans (as he would have done before the reversal), but to save Signora Teresa’s children, her dying wish for Nostromo. He accepts the mission out of guilt for his previous choice to save the silver instead of fulfilling her first dying wish—his fetching a priest for her. This decision is significant as Nostromo seemingly chooses for himself: he eases his own guilt, his moral conscience. He is no longer worried about what the Other thinks of him but about what he thinks of himself. But the “greater” reversal is his withholding of the fact that the silver is buried safe at the Isabels, despite the common belief that it has been lost at sea. Indeed, when Nostromo discovers that Decoud has died whilst waiting for Nostromo’s return, Nostromo abandons all loyalty to the Europeans and keeps the silver for himself. It is this aspect of the reversal, his materialistic self-interest, which begins his downward momentum into misfortune, and eventually leads to his tragic death.

The Middle of the Realist Plot

The plot of Nostromo may appear to be somewhat “conventional” as it adheres to Aristotle’s description of a “basic” complex plot and has only one significant change in the direction of the plot. However, most novels, especially modernist and postmodernist novels are far less conventional. Indeed, as was intimated in the previous chapter, the idea of a “middle” in the postmodern novel is somewhat defunct. For example, in Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 there are only beginnings which do not progress to proper middles, let alone determined ends; both middles and ends become casualties of the progression of disintegration. Indeed, where the middle of the realist plot is supposed to “uphold” the integrity of the beginning by making possible the intended

12 Kermode, The Sense of an Ending, 45.
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end, in Pynchon the flawed beginnings immediately “hamstring” the middles’ possibilities of upholding possible ends. This follows from Thwaites’s suggestion that, for the reader of The Crying of Lot 49, the success of the search to understand the meaning of the novel’s title is suspended and thus incomplete. The end of the novel undermines the reader’s attempts to make meaning by negating the possibility of a “successful” revelation. Thus we can say that the novel is structured as a beginning followed by a perpetual middle which is only “completed” in a corporeal sense: the last page of the novel. And it is for this reason that the need to rethink the tick-tock structure of the postmodern plot is essential. As Docherty argues, the postmodern novel can be seen as tock-tick, but we may also see it merely as “tick-...” where the interval between tick-tock is seemingly open and incomplete.

However, the realist novel, although much more conventional, still differs from Aristotle’s basic plot as it is common for more than one change of action to take place. Indeed, the larger time-frames of the realist novel enable many changes in direction over the character’s lifetime, such that the novelist can focus on not one isolated event—one change—in a character’s life—but essentially all of the events and the many changes of the character’s life. The consequence of this is that the “middle” of the realist novel—bound by the first existential beginning of a character and his or her end—must necessarily have a time-frame which is akin to the time-frames we associate with a lifetime. The value of representing these time-frames to the reader is that a fuller picture of a character’s life can be portrayed; and from this fuller picture the reader can make far more accurate interpretation and evaluation of the character. The reader can better understand the character’s choices and actions and the chains of causes and effects which have contributed to the character’s whole life. And the reader can see how the meaning of a character’s life was shaped.

How, then, is the larger temporal-frame of the middle of a character’s personal narrative represented in fiction? How is the voluminous mass of choices and actions—which shape the meaning of a character—“compressed” into a novel? Moreover, how is the voluminous mass of a character’s subjective, conscious experience—the greater
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volume of the character’s “inner life”—represented in the novel? It is with these questions that we recognise a dilemma in any possible attempt by the novelist to represent the whole of a character’s life. It is the dilemma of time-scale, which is essentially the dilemma of being able to represent all the events of a character’s life in both the larger measures of time (years and decades) and the smaller measures of time (seconds, minutes, hours, and days). Ian Watt describes how this is one of the foremost problems faced by the early realist novelists in their representation of fictional characters:

The main problem in portraying the inner life is essentially one of the time-scale. The daily experience of the individual is composed of a ceaseless flow of thought, feeling and sensation; but most literary forms—biography and even autobiography for instance—tend to be of too gross a temporal mesh to retain its actuality; and so, for the most part, is memory. Yet it is this minute-by-minute content of consciousness which constitutes what the individual’s personality really is, and dictates his relationship to others: it is only by contact with this consciousness that a reader can participate fully in the life of a fictional character.13

Watt identifies the disparity between how we experience reality and how reality is represented in fiction. The early realist novelists addressed this problem by beginning to explore the daily life of their characters in minute detail, such that they could also depict the concerns of everyday life on a much smaller and discriminative time-scale than was previously used.14 Indeed, W. J. Harvey claims that despite there being a wide-range of temporal “realities”—temporal frames—within the genre of the novel, it can be maintained that all novels are “usually much more concerned with time as a day-to-day continuum, as a small scale condition of human experience.”15 Notwithstanding a certain British bias of the history of the novel, Watt suggests that this characteristic was first evident in the novels of Daniel Defoe:

14 Ibid., 22.
[Defoe’s] fiction is the first which presents us with a picture both of the individual life in its larger perspective as a historical process, and in its closer view which shows the process being acted out against the background of the most ephemeral thoughts and actions.\(^\text{16}\)

It is this merging of the two perspectives which makes the novel invaluable to the reader: the novel can practically represent and give detail to both the moment of a character’s existential beginning and the moment of the character’s revelation of meaning, even if they are separated by many years. Jane Eyre can tell us of her day-to-day life at the age of ten in minute detail, and then merely glances at the next eight years, before describing her day-to-day experiences at the age of eighteen, all without any disruption to the story or confusion to the reader.

\textit{Interpretation and the Stream of Consciousness}

Of course, Virginia Woolf, one the foremost modernist writers, questioned the “reality” of the realist novel, and its portrayal of the movement of time, claiming that the realist novel does not necessarily provide an accurate representation of the subjective experience of life:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps

\(^{15}\) Harvey, \textit{Character and the Novel}, 103.
not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of
gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope
surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.¹⁷

From this description, and from Woolf’s own works, it can be said that our subjective,
conscious experience of the real world is not comprised of clearly demarcated and
isolated events, disconnected from each other. In reality, life is a temporal flux of
consciousness, such that the events of our lives essentially blend into one another as a
constant stream, giving us the literary style of the stream-of-consciousness novel—a
style which “purports to present a direct quotation of what occurs in the individual mind
under the impact of the temporal flux.”¹⁸ We can recognise what may be described as
the kernels and satellites—the events—of a narrative structure in both fiction and
reality; however, these events are not singular entities, temporally separated from one
another.

However, a number of Woolf’s novels, in which she employs the style of
stream-of-consciousness, are not necessarily of value to the shivering reader who is
looking to fictional characters to understand the meaning of life. This is because they
are lacking the essential element of a story-time which corresponds with that of a
“complete” lifetime. For example, the story-time of Mrs Dalloway (1925) is less than
one day in Mrs. Dalloway’s lifetime, which is a mere fraction of Mrs. Dalloway’s whole
lifetime. Consider, also, the stream-of-consciousness novels of James Joyce,
specifically Ulysses, where one day (the 16th of June, 1904) in the life of Leopold
Bloom—“Bloomsday”—is predominantly described from his subjective point of view.
The story-time of Ulysses represents only a fraction of Bloom’s conscious lifetime; it is
only a fragment of the whole of his meaningful, subjective, conscious experience, and
thus lacks the fundamental wholeness necessary for interpretation and evaluation.
Indeed, if we consider that the meaning of a character’s life must be understood in

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terms of a hermeneutic circle where “complete knowledge is always in this apparent circle, that each particular can only be understood via the general, of which it is a part, and vice versa,”\textsuperscript{19} then neither \textit{Mrs Dalloway} or \textit{Ulysses} give the reader complete knowledge of the respective novel’s protagonists. (This, of course, was not necessarily Woolf or Joyce’s intention for their respective characters).

But it becomes quickly apparent that any attempt to discursively represent a character’s stream-of-consciousness over his or her lifetime would be an absurd and impractical exercise, especially if we consider that the style of stream-of-consciousness is usually described as the loose correspondence of story-time and discourse-time (or reading-time)—the “time it takes to peruse the discourse.”\textsuperscript{20} The absurdity and impracticality of representing such a correspondence is best illustrated if we were to consider the loose correspondence of discourse-time and story-time in \textit{Ulysses}. Joyce writes some nine-hundred odd pages to represent the best part of one day, some eighteen hours, in the life of Mr. Bloom. This is a fragment—one “conscious” day—of the whole of Bloom’s lived life. Hypothetically speaking, if one were to “read” the complete consciousness of Bloom’s life, one would need to include Bloom’s complete subjective experience from the time of his birth to the time of his death; and if Bloom were to live to an age of the average person, or to the Old Testament age of three score and ten, then Joyce’s onerous task would be to produce a book bursting with almost twenty-three million pages, or, if there were an extremely conservative one hundred words per page, 2.3 billion words. To put this hypothetical claim another way, if in Woolf’s \textit{Mrs Dalloway} the chimes of Big Ben were to ring out only the hour—story-time hours which loosely correspond to reading-time hours—then the reader would “hear” its chime six hundred thousand times.

Even these exhaustive hypothetical figures may still be insufficient in representing the whole of a character’s lifetime, especially if we again consider Erich Auerbach’s examination of a passage from Woolf’s \textit{To the Lighthouse}, in which Mrs.

\textsuperscript{19} Schleiermacher, \textit{Hermeneutics and Criticism}, 24.
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Ramsay is measuring a stocking for the lighthouse keeper’s son against James’s (her six-year-old son’s) leg. The significance of this passage relates to the disparity of discourse-time (the “time” needed to represent the flux of Mrs. Ramsay’s consciousness as she measures the brown stocking) and story-time. As Auerbach states:

The . . . representation of what goes on in Mrs. Ramsay’s mind . . . takes a greater number of seconds and even minutes than the measuring—the reason being that the road taken by consciousness is sometimes traversed far more quickly than language is able to render it, if we want to make ourselves intelligible to a third person, and that is the intention here. . . . [In] a surprising fashion unknown to earlier periods, a sharp contrast results between the brief span of time occupied by the exterior event and the dreamlike wealth of a process of consciousness which traverses a whole subjective universe. 21

What Auerbach suggests is that language fails to account for the “absolute” flux of consciousness as language moves too “slow” in its representation. This is to say, story-time cannot properly correspond with reading-time because the words of the novel cannot communicate the wealth and detail of the complete subjective consciousness of its characters. Only by employing the narrative technique of stretch, where the discourse-time exceeds that of story-time, could the text even come close to representing the necessary detail. What this means is that a hypothetical novel, said to represent the complete subjective consciousness of its characters, would necessarily increase the already absurd reading time of seventy years, to an indeterminable temporal length. Thus, hypothetically speaking, if one were to read the absolute representation of a character’s consciousness with the realist novel’s story-time dimensions and a modernist’s style of stream-of-consciousness, then one would no longer be living for meaning, but reading for meaning. In short, it is an absurdity.

20 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 62. Formally, when discourse-time and story-time are relatively equal the time relation is called scene.
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**The Rhetoric of the Middle**

From the above description, it is patently clear that the novelist cannot represent the whole of a character’s temporal life, or the whole of the character’s subjective, conscious experience of this life, within the pages of his or her novel. The novelist necessarily exhausts him or herself in this attempt. This would suggest that the novel fails the shivering reader in its representation of the fictional Other as only a whole life can be accurately interpreted but also, more importantly, evaluated with equanimity. And yet, this disparity can be partly reconciled if we consider that the realist novelist, and indeed, the modern or postmodern novelist, does not necessarily allude to the “wholeness” of the representation of a character’s reality, or intend to represent a character’s complete subjective life. Instead, as Wolfgang Iser states in *The Act of Reading*, the novelist must create the “illusion” of wholeness:

> When Arnold Bennett said, “You can’t put the whole of a character into a book,” he was thinking of the discrepancy between a person’s life and the unavoidably limited form in which that life may be represented. From this fact there are two very different conclusions to be drawn. First, as Ingarden says, there must be a series of “schematised aspects” by which the character is represented, and as each incomplete view is supplemented by the next so there gradually arises the illusion of a complete representation. Second, however, one can turn one’s attention to the selective decisions that must be taken if the character is to be presented in such a way that we are able to identify him.²²

What Iser suggests is that the “complete” character of the novel must inevitably become “less round”; that there are aspects and actions of the character that are given an elevated status by the novelist such that they may be included to the exclusion of others. However, this “hierarchy” does not necessarily mean that there is something

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lacking in the representation of a character. Indeed, it can be argued that those aspects of a character which are included in the novel do “complete” the character insofar as only those aspects which are represented are necessary for understanding the “essence” of a character. This is very much the claim made by E. M. Forster when he discusses the nature of the disparate relationship between the novelist and his or her characters, and that of the novel’s characters and its reader:

[A character in a book is real] when the novelist knows everything about it. He may not choose to tell us all he knows—many of the facts, even of the kind we call obvious, may be hidden. But he will give us the feeling that though the character has not been explained, it is explicable, and we get from this a reality of a kind we can never get in daily life.

For human intercourse, as soon as we look at it for its own sake and not as a social adjunct, is seen to be haunted by a spectre. We cannot understand each other, except in a rough and ready way; we cannot reveal ourselves, even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only a makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion. But in the novel we can know people perfectly.

Forster suggests that the authoritative novelist ultimately chooses which facts, details, and, most importantly, choices and actions of a character’s life must be included in the discourse of the novel so as to “perfectly” understand the character and the character’s meaning. The novelist reveals those elements which are necessary for making meaning of both the novel and its characters by deciding whether to include or exclude certain events of the character’s story. This decision is essentially a rhetorical device of the novelist and is significant not only because it tells the reader what is necessary for understanding (or interpreting) the meaning of a character, but also because it tells the reader how to evaluate the meaning of the character’s life. Indeed, just as Tolstoy hints at the insignificance of Anna Karenina’s past by choosing to omit much of this past

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23 Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 69.
from her discoursed story, so too can the novelist choose to omit events from the middle of his or her characters' lives—events which are similarly insignificant or unnecessary for understanding the meaning of the characters' lives. Thus, in very general terms, the novelist’s choice to exclude events in a story rhetorically implies their insignificance, but also implies the significance of that which is included; or, put another way, the novelist's choice to include events in a story implies their significance, but also implies the insignificance of those that are excluded.

The Novelist’s Exclusion of Everydayness: the Summary and Ellipse

The exclusion of certain events from a story is effected by the novelist’s use of two specific narrative devices: the summary, where both the discourse- and reading-time are shorter than story-time; and the ellipse, which is essentially the same as summary except that both the discourse-time and reading-time are zero. As has been described, both of these devices are necessary for the “practicality” of the novel as they make the larger temporal frames of the realist novel possible. However, how these exclusions relate to a character’s meaningful story depends on the implicitness or explicitness of the novelist’s (or narrator’s) reasons for the exclusion of certain events. To begin with the ellipse, one of the most common literary devices, we can say that in the stories of realist novels, such as Jane Eyre or Anna Karenina, the ellipse is generally understood as an exclusion of an insignificant part of the story and the insignificance of this exclusion is implicitly understood by the reader. As Chatman claims, this implicit understanding is essential to the “transaction” of the text to its audience:

Whether the narrative is experienced through a performance or through a text, the members of the audience must respond with an interpretation: they cannot avoid
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participating in the transaction. They must fill in gaps with essential or likely events, traits and objects which for various reasons have gone unmentioned.24

The narrator, therefore, does not explicitly state the insignificance of the ellipse to the story: its insignificance is implied. These events may of course be excluded to build suspense or add drama; however, at its most basic, functional level, an ellipse can be used to exclude events which fall under the category of inauthentic everydayness: the events of our daily routine of tasks and duties. It is implied that the characters of a novel “do” undertake these activities, but they are not essential to the story. Indeed, when we think of the real Other we do not necessarily take into account their everyday activities when interpreting and evaluating their lives. And, again, we certainly do not need to know of all of Mr. Bloom’s excursions to the “cuckstool.”

These ellipses implicitly exclude the insignificant events of a character’s story; however, less common are examples where the insignificance of an ellipse is explicitly stated. However, one example can be found in Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones (1749), in the chapter: “Containing Little or Nothing.” The overt, third-person narrator tells the reader of the insignificance of the period between the end of the last chapter and the beginning of the next:

The reader will be pleased to remember, that, at the beginning of the second book of this history, we gave him a hint of our intention to pass over several large periods of time, in which nothing happened worthy of being recorded in a chronicle of this kind.

In so doing, we do not only consult our own dignity and ease, but the good and advantage of the reader: for besides that by these means we prevent him from throwing away his time, in reading without either pleasure or emolument, we give him, at all such seasons, an opportunity of employing that wonderful sagacity, of which he is master, by filling up these vacant spaces of time with his own conjectures; for which purpose we have taken care to qualify him in the preceding pages.

24 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 28.
As we are sensible, that much the greatest part of our readers are very eminently possessed of this quality, we have left them a space of twelve years to exert it in; and shall now bring forth our hero, at about fourteen years of age, not questioning that many have been long impatient to be introduced to his acquaintance.\textsuperscript{25}

Twelve years of Tom Jones’s life passes as an ellipse and the narrator gives no detail of events, choices, or actions, only stating that nothing happened and is not of any significance. Indeed, the narrator invites the reader to fill in the vacant spaces of this period with his or her own conjectures, further emphasising the little effect this period of time has on the logic of the story or, it would seem, on the reader’s interpretation of the meaningfulness of Tom Jones’s life within this period.

Like the ellipse, the summary can be employed by the narrator to communicate the insignificance of an omitted fragment of the story; however, unlike the ellipse, this insignificance of the summary is most commonly stated \textit{explicitly} by either a first-person narrator, or even an overt third-person narrator. Indeed, first-person narration particularly lends itself to explicitness as is illustrated by the previously discussed passage from Brontë’s \textit{Jane Eyre} in which Jane states: “I now pass a space of eight years almost in silence: a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connection.”\textsuperscript{26} Jane proceeds with a brief summary of these eight years and explicitly tells the reader that what she has omitted from this summary is unimportant and is of no interest to the reader. More importantly, Jane is narrating the story with the hindsight of memory, and so she is essentially recalling only the parts of her story which can be said to contribute to the reader’s understanding and interpretation of the story. Thus, the reader can trust that the moments Jane has excluded from the story are more or less insignificant. The insignificance of a character’s life is also explicitly stated as a summary in V. S. Naipaul’s \textit{A House for Mr Biswas} (1961) where the third-person narrator tells us: “In all Mr. Biswas lived for six years at The Chase, years so squashed by their own boredom and futility that at the end they could be

\textsuperscript{25} Fielding, \textit{Tom Jones}, 69–70.
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comprehended in one glance. But he had aged.‖27 This one glance, representative of discourse-time, is the summary of a boring and futile six-year period, which needs little discursive elaboration; only Mr. Biswas shows the signs of the passing of story-time.

What we must realise is that not all moments of everydayness are “insignificant” or meaningless; indeed, even the most banal moments of everydayness can be laden with meaning. This is essentially the argument made by Franco Moretti in “Serious Century” in which he discusses the nineteenth-century shift from the centrality of kernels, or what Moretti simply calls “turning points,” to the centrality of satellites or “fillers” (Moretti’s term). Moretti examines Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to explain this new emphasis:

Elizabeth and Darcy meet in chapter 3, he acts horribly, she is disgusted: first action with “consequences for the development of the story”: they are set in opposition to each other. Thirty-one chapters later, Darcy proposes to Elizabeth; second turning point: an alternative has been opened. Another twenty-seven chapters, and Elizabeth accepts him: alternative closed, end of the novel. Three turning points: beginning, middle, and ending; very geometric; very Austen-like. But of course, in between these three major scenes, Elizabeth and Darcy meet, and talk, and hear, and think about each other, and it’s not easy to quantify this type of thing, but I have done my best, and have found about 110 episodes of this kind. These are the fillers.28

Fillers comprise the narration of the everyday which is some ninety-seven percent of the total episodes of *Pride and Prejudice*. And, as Moretti claims, this is Austen’s greatest achievement: everydayness has come to be the foreground of the novel.29

Another example described by Moretti is Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* which he claims marks another significant shift in the nineteenth-century’s attitude towards the everyday. Moretti examines a scene in which Emma and Charles Bovary are having

27 Naipaul, *A House for Mr Biswas*, 182.
29 Ibid., 370, 372.
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dinner—a scene which had been previously discussed by Auerbach in *Mimesis*—which reads:

But it was above all at mealtimes that she could bear it no longer, in that little room on the ground floor, with the smoking stove, the creaking door, the oozing walls, the damp floor-tiles; all the bitterness of life seemed to be served to her on her plate, and, with the steam from the boiled beef, there rose from the depths of her soul other exaltations as it were of disgust. Charles was a slow eater; she would nibble a few hazel-nuts, or else, leaning on her elbow, would amuse herself making marks on the oilcloth with the point of her table-knife.\footnote{This excerpt is Auerbach’s translation of *Madame Bovary* in *Mimesis*, 483.}

Auerbach describes the scene as a “random moment,” without quarrel or conflict; “nothing happens, but that nothing has become a heavy oppressive, threatening something.”\footnote{Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 488.} It is on this claim of Auerbach’s that Moretti comments:

An oppressive everyday . . . Because Emma has married a mediocre man? Yes and no. Yes, because Charles is certainly a weight in her life. And no, because even when she is most distant from him—in her two adulteries, with Rudolphe and then with Leon—Emma finds exactly “the same platitudes of married life,” the same recurring hours when nothing noteworthy happens.\footnote{Moretti, “Serious Century,” 378.}

Moretti further describes this scene as a “collapse of ‘adventure’ into everyday banality.”\footnote{Ibid.} It is here that Emma realises that her “dream” life is indeed a dream and the reality of her mediocrity is clear.

The reason for Flaubert’s (and others) emphasis on fillers in nineteenth-century literature, Moretti argues, relates to “the history of private life,”\footnote{Moretti, “Serious Century,” 378.} more specifically to the history of bourgeois private life:

\footnote{Ibid., 380.}
[Fillers] offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life. . . . They are part of what Weber called the “rationalisation” of modern life: a process that begins in the economy and in the administration, but eventually pervades the sphere of free time, private life, entertainment, feelings. . . . Or in other words: fillers are an attempt at rationalising the novelistic universe: turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all.35

This is precisely the world of Emma Bovary where life has become banal everydayness. But life, it can be argued, is indeed like this: not all is adventure. However, the “everyday banality” of this supposedly random event is important in that it is included within the discourse of the novel as an event worth discussing. The reason for this is that it is very much an “authentic” moment for Emma, despite it being articulated by the narrator for the reader. This is evidenced particularly in the sentence: “All the bitterness of life seemed to be served to her on her plate, and, with the steam from the boiled beef, there rose from the depths of her soul other exaltations as it were of disgust.” As Auerbach comments:

Here it is not Emma who speaks, but the writer. . . . She doubtless has such a feeling; but if she wanted to express it, it would not come out like that; she has neither the intelligence nor the cold candour of self-accounting necessary for such a formulation.36

The narrator, or, as Auerbach implies, Flaubert himself, must say what Emma Bovary is thinking. They are “thinking” the same but Flaubert is the voice. More importantly, however, is the content of this thought: what Auerbach’s description of this random moment implies is that what was once considered everyday banality or “everydayness” is not necessarily “everyday inauthenticity.” This is to say that actions which may appear inauthentic (such as when we are involved in our daily tasks and duties, or, as

35 Ibid., 381.
36 Auerbach, Mimesis, 484.
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Heidegger states, when we are busy, excited, interested, or ready for enjoyment\(^{37}\) are not necessarily so: meaningful, reflective, authentically thoughts can take place at the most meaningless times. This also suggests that everydayness is not always insignificant to a novel’s meaningful story. The minute events of life—the fillers which are often excluded from a novel’s discourse by the use of an ellipse or summary—can also be very important in the creation and shaping of meaning—they are meaningful in themselves and they are necessary for the creation of definitive meaning. Indeed, Felski similarly suggests that daily life, “often spurned or ignored in the mainstream tradition of Western philosophy,” is nevertheless an important aspect of our lives. It is for this reason that “the everyday must be rescued from oblivion by being transformed; the all too prosaic must be made to reveal its hidden subversive poetry. The name for this form of aesthetic distancing is of course defamiliarisation.”\(^{38}\) Flaubert, it can be argued, is doing just this; but to defamiliarise is also to recognise how the insignificant moments in our lives are sometimes laden with meaning; and it is also to make the reader recognise that the insignificant moments of his or her life can take place at the most insignificant times.

Exclusions and Corporeal Conviction

What the above description of the exclusory powers of the ellipse and the summary—be it the exclusion of adventure or everydayness—principal suggests is that there is “more” to a character than is given to the reader—that there are more experiences of the character “outside” of the discourse. However, it can be argued that in actuality there is nothing else to the character, no more subjective, conscious experiences of the character outside of the novel’s discourse because these experiences do not “exist.” This does not mean that the reader does not interpret and extrapolate on what is not written within the pages of the novel, only that what is not written does not “exist” and

\(^{37}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 43H.
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does not have “corporeal conviction.” The reader does not need to interpret and extrapolate on these unknowns to understand the experience of the character, and it is unnecessary for the reader to believe that there is more outside of the novel’s pages—something that the novelist has kept to him or herself. One can liken this approach to a phenomenological bracketing of the novel by which “the real object, the actual historical context of the literary work, its author, conditions of production and readership are ignored; phenomenological criticism aims instead at a wholly ‘immanent’ reading of the text, totally unaffected by anything outside it.”

The reader must assume that what is found in the discourse is all the raw story material necessary for an interpretation and evaluation of a character’s life, regardless of what the novelist has chosen to conceal from the reader. What should be interpreted is printed on the pages in front of the reader, and can only come from these pages. This is the essential material for making meaning.

This is also very much the argument of Georg Lukács in The Theory of the Novel, when he discusses the “immanent” meaning and wholeness of the novel, regardless of what is explicitly or implicitly excluded from its discourse. Lukács claims that the novel resorts to the biographical form to overcome life’s “heterogenous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events.”

This overcoming is achieved through what Lukács calls the novel’s “bad” infinity. Lukács states that, on the one hand,

the scope of the world [in the novel] is limited by the scope of the hero’s possible experiences and its mass is organised by the orientation of his development towards finding the meaning of life in self-recognition; on the other hand, the discretely heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events receives a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolised by the story of his life.

38 Felski, “Introduction,” 609.
39 Eagleton, Literary Theory: An Introduction, 51.
40 Lukács, The Theory of the Novel, 81.
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The beginning and the end of the world of a novel, which are determined by the beginning and end of the process which supplies the content of the novel, thus become significant landmarks along a clearly mapped road. The novel in itself and for itself is by no means bound to the natural beginning and end of life—to birth and death; yet by the points at which it begins and ends, it indicates the only essential segment of life, that segment which is determined by the central problem, and it touches upon whatever lies before or after that segment only in perspective and only as it relates to that problem; it tends to unfold its full epic totality only within that span of life which is essential to it.

When the beginning and the end of this segment of life do not coincide with those of a human life, this merely shows that the biographical form is oriented towards ideas: the development of a man is still the thread upon which the whole world of the novel is strung and along which it unrolls, but now this development acquires significance only because it is typical of that system of ideas and experienced ideals which regulatively determines the inner and outer world of the novel.41

Lukács suggests that the novel form’s totality is limited by the time-frame of the novel and the experiences of the hero, yet it is total as all the other elements of the story are related to, and unified by, the main character and his or her story. Thus, the exclusions in the text are not essential for the interpretation and evaluation of the meaning of the novel or the main character; however, the events that are included are essential for the interpretation and evaluation of the meaning of the novel and the main character—a claim which is very similar to Aristotle’s description of the unity of the tragic plot.

This brings us to one final claim regarding the insignificance of the “gaps between the gig lamps,” namely that the reader need not, and should not, “project” events into those gaps which are not detailed within the discourse. As the narrator of Tom Jones explicitly states, the events that occur within these undiscoursed periods are purely conjectural. Similarly, when there is an ellipse in the text, the reader may assume that things could have happened, but any attempt to complete these sections, and “bridge the gap,” do so only as conjecture. The reader can assume that “little to

41 Ibid., 81–82.
nothing” happens, or, put another way, the reader can assume that the character has not necessarily made any “significant” new choices of action during the undiscoursed periods of the novel and is merely maintaining the “active” stasis of his or her actions. This is to say that even though the reader of *Tom Jones* is invited to infer the action which occurs in the period of twelve years, the reader normally does not have to expand on the nature of the undiscoursed events. This is not to say that the time period is unimportant, only that no action of any significance takes place. Similarly, when the narrator of *Mr Biswas* tells us that Mr. Biswas’s life was boring and futile—in-itself a stasis statement—the reader needs only to consider that for six years, Mr. Biswas’s life was boring and futile. There is no need to elaborate on this statement—it can simply be accepted as given. All else falls into the category of meaningless speculation and undesirable loose ends (a claim that will be further addressed in the following chapter when we look at the *end* of the novel).

**Inclusions as Existential Beginnings and Authentic Moments**

This brief description of the narrative devices of summary and ellipse implies that there is a basic hierarchy of meaningfulness in life and in the novel when interpreting and evaluating the meaning of a life: those events which are excluded are for the most part inessential to meaningfulness and (by default) those events which are included are elevated, such that they may be considered essential to meaningfulness. But, as was intimated by the discussion on the banal everydayness of Emma Bovary’s dinner with Charles, this hierarchy is not simply a matter of saying that those events that are included are more meaningful than those that are excluded just because they “exist” or contribute to the logic of the story: the moments that are included are more meaningful because they are imbued with “value,” a claim which is best explained by Forster:
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Daily life is . . . full of the time-sense. We think one event occurs after or before another, the thought is often in our minds, and much of our talk and action proceeds on the assumption. Much of our talk and action, but not all; there seems something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called “value,” something which is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles. . . . So daily life, whatever it may be really, is practically composed of two lives—the life in time and the life by values—and our conduct reveals a double allegiance. “I only saw her for five minutes, but it was worth it.” There you have both allegiances in a single sentence. And what the story does is to narrate the life in time. And what the entire novel does—if it is a good novel—is to include the life by values as well.  

Forster describes the value of “notable pinnacles” (which appear to be analogous to Woolf’s description of the “gig lamps” of fiction) and how these moments mean more than simply the passing of time. These moments are laden with significance and meaning, just as the Augenblick means more than a “blink” or “twinkling of the eye.”

This claim of Forster’s is also significant if we consider that how we look at the past and how we evaluate these pinnacles differs greatly in reality and in fiction. In reality, when we look back on the past we do not necessarily “see” our meaningful or authentic moments. Think of Citizen Kane when he reflects on his childhood sleigh: his reflection on his past is essentially authentic; however, his playing in the snow with his childhood sleigh could hardly be described as the same. Thus, meaningful happiness, Kane playing in the snow, could be described as inauthentic. In realist fiction, however, it would seem that the notable pinnacles of the story essentially revolve around the authentic, often anxious moments of the lives of the novel’s characters. These pinnacles reflect change and new authentic choices and actions, whereas the ellipses and summaries of the story reflect stasis and inauthentic everydayness—the inauthentic filler. Moreover, the authentic pinnacles of fiction reflect how a meaningful choice can become problematic, and how meaningfulness is essentially in a state of

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42 Forster, Aspects of the Novel, 42–43.
flux, the consequence being that one’s projects must be continually chosen and re-evaluated.

Konstantin Levin

The story of Levin in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* exemplifies how the events of the novel revolve around these significant, authentic moments of the character’s life. However, because *Anna Karenina* has two main stories, that of Anna and that of Levin, we also notice that the “inauthentic” periods between the authentic moments of Levin’s life are essentially “occupied” by the “authentic” moments of Anna’s concurrent story. This shift in point of view emphasises the temporal gap between the authentic moments, but also emphasises the meaninglessness of the inauthentic periods which have been omitted from Levin’s story. The character of Levin is also an especially pertinent example because Levin is engaged in a number of meaningful projects, each of which continues to overlay the others in their meaningfulness, such that his primary projects become secondary, and his secondary projects become primary. Levin also illustrates the torment of perplexity of not understanding what it is that makes life meaningful. This perplexity is also that of Tolstoy, himself, whom the character of Levin was essentially based on:

Tolstoy pours out much of his own experience through the character of Levin—whose name echoes his own first name: Lev—including his philosophical and religious doubts, his moral crises, and his suicidal despair. . . . He also endows Levin with his own love of the country, dislike of society, idealisation of the peasants and of manual work, and with ideas for better and fairer management of the land. When Levin goes hunting, his enjoyment is Tolstoy’s. Even more remarkably, Levin’s experience of betrothal and marriage are also Tolstoy’s own.⁴³
Levin’s philosophical and religious doubts, moral crises, and suicidal despair are very much Tolstoy’s, a claim which is further evidenced in his autobiographical work “My Confession” (1882):

Five years ago something very strange began to happen with me: I was overcome by minutes at first of perplexity and then of an arrest of life, as though I did not know how to live or what to do, and I lost myself and was dejected. But that passed, and I continued to live as before. Then those minutes of perplexity were repeated oftener and oftener, and always in one and the same form. These arrests of life found their expression in ever the same questions: “Why? Well, and then?”

However, Tolstoy has a revelation, finding an answer to his questions:

No matter how I may put the question, “How must I live?” the answer is, “According to God’s law.” “What real result will there be from my life?”—“Eternal torment or eternal bliss.” “What is the meaning which is not destroyed by death?”—“The union with infinite God, paradise.”

Tolstoy's philosophical and religious doubts, moral crises, and suicidal despair become the significant events of Levin’s life within the discoursed story of Anna Karenina.

To illustrate how the pinnacles of Levin’s NOW-story are essentially the authentic moments and existential beginnings of his life, we will divide the novel into a number of broad narrative blocks and main actions which properly belong to Levin’s story. This method is by no means exhaustive but it will serve the purpose of illustrating how the significant, authentic moments (the duration of which can be

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43 Thorlby, Leo Tolstoy: Anna Karenina, 6.
46 Several narrative blocks have been omitted simply because they are either not strictly centred on Levin or because of their lack of significance to the story, i.e., when Levin goes to the election.
measured in days or even hours), make up the greater volume of the discourse, despite the overall length of the NOW-story being more than two-and-a-half years.\footnote{Figures for all temporal measures of \textit{Anna Karenina} are derived from Schultze, \textit{The Structure of “Anna Karenina.”}}

In the first narrative block (I, 5–15)\footnote{The general demarcation of these narrative blocks is derived from Schultze, \textit{The Structure of “Anna Karenina.”}} of Levin’s story, the main action (and greater volume of the discourse) concentrates on Levin’s decision to begin a new life with Kitty Shcherbatsky (a long time family friend of Levin and youngest sister of Dolly) by asking her to marry him. Despite the innocuousness of Levin’s choice to propose to Kitty, it would seem that the impetus behind his proposal is a far more serious matter than it would normally occasion, as he was being plagued by “questions about the meaning of life and death which lately had been coming more and more often to his mind.”\footnote{Tolstoy, \textit{Anna Karenina}, 24.}

Levin has been facing an authentic, existential crisis: his past life has become somewhat meaningless, prompting him to question what it is that makes life meaningful. This existential crisis has continued to plague Levin and has been cause for his suicidal despair. And to the question of meaning, Levin, it would seem, has found an expedient answer—the meaningful happiness of marriage—and so he has set himself to asking for Kitty’s hand. For Levin, Kitty is the source of all his happiness and meaning; their union is the primary meaningful project of Levin’s life and will supersede all previous secondary projects. However, because of Kitty’s expectation of a proposal from Vronsky, she refuses Levin, frustrating the success of his intended, meaningful project. It is this frustration of his project which ends the first narrative block, ending this significant moment in Levin’s life, the duration of which block is essentially one day—a minimal portion of the novel’s duration despite a significant volume of discourse being dedicated to its representation.

The second narrative block of Levin’s story (I, 24–27) begins on the day following the proposal, when Levin returns to his farm and his project of farming life. The duration of this block is also no more than a day and centres on Levin’s decision to begin a new life regardless of the despair borne from Kitty’s refusal. Indeed, Levin is
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resolved that his life would be better than before, and “decided from that day on not to
hope any more for the extraordinary happiness that marriage was to have given him,
and as a consequence not to neglect the present so much.”

This second narrative block ends with Levin claiming that “all is well,” suggesting that some sort of stasis has been reattained. And, indeed, the third narrative block (II, 12–17) begins some three months after the end of the second block. We can infer that during these three months of Levin’s life, which have occurred “between” the two blocks, Levin is immersed in the inauthentic everydayness of farming life and in the writing of a book. However, the main action and discursive volume of the third block (the duration of which is several days) relates to Stepan’s (Anna’s brother) arrival at Levin’s farm bringing with him the news that Kitty is still unmarried and has fallen ill. This news summons Levin from his immersion in the inauthenticity of farming life and he is reminded of his primary project: his love for Kitty and the meaningfulness of their union. The happy, inauthentic everydayness of farming life is disrupted and Levin once again becomes authentic, which is to say he becomes “gloomy” and despondent.

The main action of the fourth narrative block (III, 1–12) concentrates on Levin’s inauthentic mode of farming life in which he tries to “make” his life meaningful. The duration of this period is approximately three months; however, one of the most significant events—the main action of the discourse—is that Levin is once again reminded of Kitty and reminded of his love for her. Indeed, all other thoughts, discussions, actions within this chapter are merely background noise in comparison to the meaningful aura that surrounds Kitty. But, again Levin endeavours to cover-up this “abject authenticity” with farming life, and even goes so far as to renounce all his “former dreams about family life.” Following his authentic thoughts of Kitty is an inauthentic period of approximately two-and-a-half months to which very little discourse is given. However, this fourth narrative block ends when, having immersed himself in

50 Ibid., 92.
51 Ibid., 96.
the inauthenticity of farming, Levin “physically” sees Kitty, and he has a new, authentic realisation, namely that, regardless of the project, it is her that will make his life meaningful: “There was no other being in the world capable of concentrating for him all the light and meaning of life,” and once again his primary, meaningful project comes to the forefront of his mind. All else is background when contrasted with Kitty. Indeed, the meaninglessness of his farming projects is thrown into greater relief when he thinks of the meaningfulness that a life with Kitty would bring.

However, out of pride and despite his desire to be with her, Levin does not propose to Kitty. Indeed, the main action of the fifth narrative block (III, 24–32) is focused on Levin covering up his desire for Kitty and his endeavour to make meaningful those projects which previously held no meaning. And yet despite these efforts, he still cannot forget her and again becomes despondent, a mood which is all the more heightened when his dying brother Nikolai comes to visit. Seeing how near death his brother is, Levin begins to have authentic thoughts of his own death, which have only for the first time come to the forefront of his mind:

Death, the inevitable end of everything, presented itself to him for the first time with irresistible force. And this death, which here, in his beloved brother, moaning in his sleep and calling by habit, without distinction, now on God, now on the devil, was not at all as far off as it had seemed to him before. It was in him, too—he felt it. If not now, then tomorrow, if not tomorrow, then in thirty years—did it make any difference? And what this inevitable death was, he not only did not know, he not only had never thought of it, but he could not and dared not think of it.

“I work, I want to do something, and I’ve forgotten that everything will end, that there is—death.”

Levin sees no purpose in his future life. All meaningfulness has come to an end and all supposedly meaningful projects shall remain incomplete. And because he cannot have

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52 Ibid., 276.
53 Ibid., 277.
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Kitty, who is to make his life meaningful, he has no reason to live. Indeed, Levin’s response to an invitation to Paris from Shcherbatsky, Kitty’s cousin, is simply: “No, I’m finished. It’s time for me to die.”55 However, almost immediately after this declaration, Levin realises that he must continue to live:

He had to live his life to the end, until death came. Darkness covered everything for him; but precisely because of this darkness he felt that his undertaking was the only guiding thread in this darkness, and he seized it and held on to it with all his remaining strength.56

This realisation ends the fifth narrative block, and begins the sixth block (IV, 7, 9, 11, 13–16), which has the duration of essentially one evening, in which the main action is a party to which both Levin and Kitty have been invited. In the months prior to the party, Levin has been continuing his “inauthentic” project of writing a book on farming, but he has also continued to think of death. However, this despair changes, when Levin sees Kitty at the party and he is reminded of his primary project: his desire for a marriage with Kitty. He again chooses this project and finally proposes, thereby, beginning a new meaningful, authentic life.

The main action of the seventh block (V, 1–6) is Kitty and Levin’s marriage. Levin says that he is in a state of “happy madness,” and yet this block is also marked by Levin’s doubt of the existence of God. More importantly, despite the significance of the event of a wedding, very little detail is given to the wedding, which seemingly detracts from its significance to Levin’s story; indeed, as we soon learn Levin’s marriage to Kitty does not completely overcome Levin’s existential anxiety.

The eighth block (V, 14–20) begins three months after the marriage (after three months of inauthentic, “happy madness”) with the main action being the death of Levin’s brother, Nikolai. Because of the presence of death, Levin experiences another authentic moment: he reflects on his life and his marriage and recognises that he

54 Ibid., 348.
55 Ibid., 351.
56 Ibid., 352.
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indeed, has a happy and meaningful life. Finally it would seem that Levin has achieved
his goal of a happy, meaningful, married life. And yet in the ninth (VI, 1–15) and tenth
(VII, 1–11, 13–16) narrative blocks, Levin discovers that the happiness of marriage is
not constant, uniform meaningfulness. Indeed, Levin is plagued by the continual
torment of jealousy (both his and Kitty's) and by questions of whether his marriage and
his happiness with Kitty, or, indeed, his secondary project of a farming life, are indeed
meaningful projects. His "expedient answers" to what is meaningful in life are still
questionable inasmuch as they are "guesses" at answers, but are not answers in
themselves. He is in continual flux in terms of the meaningfulness of his life. More
importantly, the duration of these thoughts and questions could be measured not by
months, but by days, or even hours and minutes; they are authentic thoughts which are
discursively voluminous but not necessarily temporally long.

It is in the eleventh and final block (VIII, 1–19)—which takes place almost two
months after Anna's death—that Levin has one of his most significant, authentic
moments, when, once again, he questions the meaningfulness of his life and
understands that death may once again be the answer:

"Without knowing what I am and why I'm here, it is impossible for me to live. And I
cannot know that, therefore I cannot live," Levin would say to himself.

"In infinite time, in the infinity of matter, in infinite space, a bubble-organism
separates itself, and that bubble holds out for a while and then bursts, and that bubble
is—me."

This was a tormenting untruth, but it was the sole, the latest result of age-long
labours of human thought in that direction.

This was the latest belief on which all researches of the human mind in almost all
fields were built. This was the reigning conviction, and out of all other explanations it was
precisely this one that Levin, himself not knowing when or how, had involuntarily adopted
as being at any rate the most clear.

But it was not only untrue, it was the cruel mockery of some evil power, evil and
offensive, which it was impossible to submit to.
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It was necessary to be delivered from this power. And deliverance was within everyone’s reach. It was necessary to stop this dependence on evil. And there was one means—death.

And, happy in his family life, a healthy man, Levin was several times so close to suicide that he hid a rope lest he hang himself with it, and was afraid to go about with a rifle lest he shoot himself.

But Levin did not shoot himself or hang himself and went on living.\(^{57}\)

Levin goes on living his married life with Kitty, yet is marked by his despair of not knowing the true meaning of life. However, stemming from a conversation with the muzhik Fyodor, Levin has a revelation and somewhat of a new existential beginning. Fyodor is telling Levin of the difference between the characters of an innkeeper, Kirillov, and Platon, “a wealthy and good muzhik,” and how they achieve their wealth—how they “make it pay.” Levin asks:

“Then how does Kirillov make it pay?”

“Mityukha” (so the muzhik scornfully called the innkeeper) “makes it pay right enough, Konstantin Dmitrich! He pushes till he gets his own. He takes no pity on a peasant. But Uncle Fokanych” (so he called old Platon), “he won’t skin a man. He lends to you, he lets you off. So he comes out short. He’s a man, too.”

“But why should he let anyone off?”

“Well, that’s how it is—people are different. One man just lives for his own needs, take Mityukha even, just stuffs his belly, but Fokanych—he’s an upright old man. He lives for the soul. He remembers God.”


“Everybody knows how—by the truth, by God’s way. People are different. Now, take you even, you wouldn’t offend anybody either . . .”

“Yes, yes, goodbye!” said Levin, breathless with excitement, and, turning, he took his stick and quickly walked off towards home.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 788–89.
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A new, joyful feeling came over him. At the muzhik’s words about Fokanych living for the soul, by the truth, by God’s way, it was as if a host of vague but important thoughts burst from some locked-up place and, all rushing towards the same goal, whirled through his head, blinding him with their light.58

Levin has his final authentic moment and revelation. Once again he finds some answer to the question of meaningfulness: meaningfulness in religion and by God’s will. Indeed, the significance of this final, authentic revelation is that Tolstoy again uses the term “blinding light” which he also uses in an earlier description of how Kitty concentrates for Levin “all the light and meaning of life.” The symbolism of light determines the meaningfulness of this recognition and imbibes it with a sense of authority. These two projects—his life with Kitty and a life lived in God’s way—make Levin’s life meaningful.

From this far from exhaustive description, we can calculate that if each block essentially represents one day, then the greater discursive volume of Levin’s story is comprised of eleven days; eleven days out of the duration of two-and-a-half years of the NOW-story. But, despite this small temporal fraction of the whole story, these eleven days represent the essential part of the story as they are the significant, authentic moments of Levin’s personal narrative: they centre on Kitty and Levin’s authentic thoughts of the meaningfulness their marriage would bring; and they also centre on authentic thoughts of death and meaning, and God and meaning. And it is these qualitative moments which are also quantitatively discoursed. Their significance lies in the depth of representation and detailing. Of course, we do see this depth of detailing elsewhere in the novel, such as Levin and Stepan’s snipe hunt (a passion of Tolstoy); but for the most part it is the significant, authentic moments of Levin’s life which are qualitatively and quantitatively detailed, which further elevates their significance in Levin’s meaningful story.

58 Ibid., 794.
Where the postmodern novel may confuse the distinction between the meaningfulness of events within the plot, the realist novel approaches the meaningful events of the novel in a far more overt manner. This is particularly evident in the story of Levin and the rhetoric behind the inclusion of the events of Levin’s life. They represent authentic moments which centre on his thoughts of Kitty, death, and the question of the meaning of life. They are also moments where change and new direction takes place; where new choices and new actions “move” the story. However, as Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan states in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* the meaningfulness of the inclusions (and exclusions) of a text, particularly in modernist texts, is not always easy to identify:

Ordinarily, the most important events or conversations are given in detail (i.e. decelerated), whereas the less important ones are compressed (i.e. accelerated). But this is not always the case; sometimes the effect of shock or irony is produced by summing up briefly the most central event and rendering trivial events in detail.  

An example of this shock or irony can be found in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. The story-time of both the first and third parts of *To the Lighthouse* (“The Window” and “To the Lighthouse,” respectively) is one afternoon or the best part of a day. However, in between these two days is a span of some ten years, which is broken by the second part, “Time Passes” (the night before the day of the third part). In “Time Passes,” there are bracketed statements which relate to events which have occurred over the past ten years. These events including the deaths of: Mrs. Ramsay—“[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.]” 60; Prue Ramsay—“[Prue Ramsay died that summer in some illness connected

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60 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 140.
with childbirth, which was indeed a tragedy, people said. They said nobody deserved happiness more\[^{61}\]; and Andrew Ramsay—"[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.\[^{62}\]"

As has been suggested throughout this thesis, the event of a character's death is a very significant event in a novel; yet Woolf chooses to simply state only the bare, minimal details of her character's respective deaths. Indeed, instead of detailing the characters' death, Woolf chooses to centre the first part of the story primarily on Lily Briscoe's painting of a picture, Mrs. Ramsay's mending of a stocking, and a dinner for the Ramsay family and their guests (all of which occur in an afternoon), and centres the third part on the boat-journey to the lighthouse. The theory behind Woolf's choices to either heighten or lessen the intensity of certain events within the story is discussed by Hermione Lee in her introduction to Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*:

Brackets are a way of making more than one thing happen at once. But they also create an unsettling ambiguity about the status of events. What is more "important," the death of Mrs. Ramsay, or the fall of a fold of a green shawl in an empty room? If the novel makes us think of more than one thing at once, and exists in more than one time, which takes precedence? Is the life of the Ramsays in the garden and house enclosed by the outside world as if in parenthesis, as the lighthouse is surrounded by the sea? Or is it the Ramsays that are the main text, and everything else is in brackets?\[^{63}\]

Questions such as these suggest that the hierarchy of events in fiction are not always clear-cut and identifiable; however, it can be argued that the realist novelists, such as Tolstoy, were far more overt and less subversive in their reasons for the inclusion of some events to the exclusion of others.

\[^{61}\] Ibid., 144.
\[^{62}\] Ibid., 145.
\[^{63}\] Hermione Lee, introduction to *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf, x–xi.
It is essentially these overtly meaningful events which give shape to the realist character’s life. As has been intimated above, the middle of the novel, bound by the beginning(s) and the end of a character’s life, is where the shaping of the character takes place, such that the character becomes who they intended to become, not by a single event in his or her personal narrative, but by all the discoursed and, to some extent, the undiscoursed events of the character’s personal narrative. It is in the middle where the character gains his or her “roundness” by representing the actions that make them who they will become. The middle is also the place where interpretation and evaluation continues to take place, as new interpretations of a character supersede past interpretations. However, the middle is also where the meaning of a character’s life becomes more and more limited because of the finitude of the character’s life. Indeed, because death, as Heidegger suggests, is always “impending” it continually limits our freedom and possibilities and increasingly determines the shape of the meaning of our lives; and it also “limits” evaluation (again, the martyr cannot redeem a worthless life). This claim is somewhat analogous to Paul Goodman’s description of “probability” within the narrative of a poem: “In the beginning anything is possible; in the middle things become probable; in the end everything is necessary.” Chatman elaborates on this claim stating:

The working out of plot (or at least some plots) is a process of declining or narrowing possibility. The choices become more and more limited, and the final choice seems not a choice at all, but an inevitably.

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64 Goodman, The Structure of Literature, 14, quoted in Chatman, Story and Discourse, 46.
65 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 46.
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The same can be said for our meaningful projects: when we first choose our meaningful projects we are absolutely free to choose whatever project we desire (within the limiting factors of our facticity) and almost any project is possible; however, because of the finitude of life, and the fact that time continues to slip away, the meaning of our lives becomes more and more probable regardless of whether it is the intended meaning or not; and in death, the “definitive” meaning of our projects, intended or otherwise, is inevitable because finitude determines it. Indeed, this movement towards “inevitability” is what makes us anxious because we want to know what becomes of our choices as the limiting shadows of finitude grow continually longer, removing the freedom of possibility. Further, the inevitably of definitive meanings comes irrespective of new existential beginnings. This is because new existential beginnings also become more and more limited in terms of their overall influence on the complete meaning of one’s life, and, to some extent, the range of possible choices. This is very much related to Heidegger’s description of authentic resoluteness: “The resolution is precisely the disclosive projection and determination of what is factically possible at the time.”

The factical possibilities of one’s life are determined by its relation to the time of one’s life—“time” which is influenced and “determined” by one’s finitude. This claim is illustrated by figure 5, below, where the oblique lines stemming from the horizontal line at E, E₂, and E₃ represent several possible choices which are not chosen, but can also be said to represent the range of possible choices as the angle created by the two oblique lines becomes smaller as time continues.

![Figure 5: Limiting factors of facticity.](image)

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66 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 298H.
For good or ill, the shape of meaning is determined by temporality: the time-frames of meaningfulness dictate the shape of meaning. However, as will now be illustrated, the shaping of a character in a novel is greatly influenced by the “fragmenting” of the character’s life and the omission of events of the character’s life from the novel’s discourse, such that it is not necessarily the character’s whole life that shapes and determines the character’s meaning, but the fragment(s) of the character’s life which are represented by the NOW-story. One may argue that in postmodern fictions—where the unification of identity is purposefully undermined, and where reality is ever only experienced in the present—this limiting of possibilities is meaningless. Instead of limiting the character’s life, each segment and each fragment appears to necessitate treatment as isolated and outside of the character’s overall shape. That is to say, a character’s “past” and the name and identity which belong to the character’s past does not necessarily or categorically resemble the character’s “present” or “future” character, or his or her name or identity; nor does the character’s past necessarily or categorically influence or limit the character’s present or future. Each “new” identity defies unity and any sense of facticity; therefore, there is no clear or definable shape to the postmodern character. Of course, what must be observed is that this description does in fact resemble the existentialist’s claim that we are always free to choose—we are condemned to choose—and in a sense can choose a new identity; however, unlike the postmodernist, the existentialist would also argue that these new identities are nevertheless unified. Indeed, one cannot dismiss one’s past so easily: even an individual who changes his or her name in real life—tries to literally shake-off their identity—is necessarily haunted by his or her past and shaped by their past, if only in terms of the limiting factors of facticity and possibilities. This is also the case for the character of realist fiction where there is a dependency on the concept of unity and shape for its structure, and where a character’s past, present, and future each play a significant role in creating this unity and shape.
One of the best ways of illustrating how a character of realist fiction is given shape through the middle of the novel, and how the temporal frame of the period of the NOW-story influences interpretation and evaluation, is by again examining the story of Anna Karenina. As was described in the previous chapter, Anna's NOW-story begins with an "unwanted" existential beginning when she meets Vronsky and starts a new meaningful life with Vronsky. The middle of Anna's story begins after this secondary existential beginning, and is comprised of all the incidents between this beginning and the end of Anna's story, her death—the final incident of her personal narrative. Within this period is Anna's ascending happiness as she enjoys what is essentially her now authentic, subjectively meaningful life with Vronsky. The momentum of Anna's happy, meaningful relationship with Vronsky is essentially maintained; however, following an incident in which Vronsky injures himself during a horse-race, Anna and Vronsky's "private" affair is revealed. Under the scrutiny of Karenin, Anna is compelled to tell of her affair to which Karenin replies: "'So be it! But I demand that the outward conventions of propriety be observed until'—his voice trembled—'until I take measures to secure my honour and inform you of them.'"  

Anna is initially pleased with her telling Karenin of the affair as the unspoken affair made her feel that her situation was "false" and "dishonest." However, her telling Karenin has a secondary consequence in that it removes the ground from which she was safe and protected, but also begins her downward movement into tragedy. Anna becomes anxious, and suddenly feels that her relationship with Vronsky is losing its strength and meaningfulness. This change also signals the beginning of her descent into unease and paranoia, causing her to make rash decisions for her life:

[Anna] went on sitting in the same position, her head and arms hanging down, and every once in a while her whole body shuddered, as if wishing to make some gesture, to say
something, and then became still again. She kept repeating: “My God! My God!” But neither the “my” nor the “God” had any meaning for her. Though she had never doubted the religion in which she had been brought up, the thought of seeking help from religion in her situation was as foreign to her as seeking help from Alexei Alexandrovich. She knew beforehand that the help of religion was possible only on condition of renouncing all that made up the whole meaning of life for her. Not only was it painful for her, but she was beginning to feel fear before the new, never experienced state of her soul. She felt that everything was beginning to go double in her soul, as an object sometimes goes double in tired eyes. Sometimes she did not know what she feared, what she desired: whether she feared or desired what had been or what would be, and precisely what she desired, she did not know.

“Ah, what am I doing!” she said to herself, suddenly feeling pain in both sides of her head. When she came to herself, she saw that she was clutching the hair on her temples and squeezing them with both hands. She jumped up and began pacing.

“Coffee’s ready, and Mamzelle and Seryozha are waiting,” said Annushka, coming back again and finding Anna in the same position.

“Seryozha? What about Seryozha?” Anna asked, suddenly becoming animated, remembering her son’s existence for the first time that whole morning.

“He’s been naughty, it seems,” Annushka answered smiling.

“What has he done?”

“You had some peaches on the table in the corner room, and it seems he ate one on the sly.”

The reminder of her son suddenly brought Anna out of that state of hopelessness which she had been in. She remembered the partly sincere, though much exaggerated, role of the mother who lives for her son, which she had taken upon herself in recent years, and felt with joy that, in the circumstances she was in, she had her domain, independent of her relations with her husband and Vronsky. That domain was her son. Whatever position she was in, she could not abandon her son. . . . She had a goal in life. And she had to act, to act in order to safeguard that position with her son, so that he would not be taken from her. She even had to act soon, as soon as possible, while he

had not yet been taken from her. She had to take her son and leave. Here was the one thing she now had to do.\textsuperscript{68}

This event in Anna’s life is essentially a third existential beginning: Anna renounces her past choices, her past meaningful projects of her life with Karenin, and then Vronsky, and chooses a new meaningful project: to be a mother to her son. All of her previous projects have fallen into meaninglessness, such that her son is now the primary source of meaningfulness in her life: care of Seryozha is her primary goal, a goal which was earlier replaced by her love for Vronsky. But, as Anna says herself, care of Seryozha is an insincere goal. And it is because of this insincerity that, just as quickly as this project is decided, it is superseded by Anna’s final project—her martyrdom—which ironically can also be identified as a fourth existential beginning: it is a project of revenge against Vronsky, as is implied by the novel’s epigram: “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” Anna deserts her son, abandoning the half-hearted meaningful project she chose earlier, and takes her own life. And it is here that the tragedy of Anna’s life is determined.

From this brief summary of Anna’s story, we can begin to interpret and evaluate Anna’s life and give shape to its meaning by crudely dividing her life into at least two meaningful parts. To do this we must also include Anna’s undiscoursed past (the period prior to her meeting Vronsky) such that it is an evaluation of her whole life (with the exclusion of her formative years). Anna’s undiscoursed past is essentially the period of her life which began when she first married Karenin, and ended when she met Vronsky. The temporal length of this part can be approximated to at least nine years.\textsuperscript{69} This period of Anna’s life with Karenin had been evaluated kindly by the Other, which is to say that, in very simple terms, it was\textit{ objectively} meaningful and valued. But upon meeting Vronsky, Anna retrospectively finds this past to be altogether meaningless. And it is here that her new\textit{ subjectively} meaningful life with Vronsky

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 288–89.
\textsuperscript{69} This figure is based on the knowledge that Anna’s eight-year-old son Seryozha was not born out of wedlock.
begins. The temporal length of this period is approximately two-and-a-half years, with the discursive beginning (a in figure 6, below) of her meeting Vronsky and ending some short period before her death. The significance of this contrast relates to the two temporally disparate halves of her life: the subjective meaningfulness of Anna’s life with Vronsky—which began with her second existential beginning (E2) and “ended” with her third existential beginning (E3)—is a relatively short period when compared to her now retrospectively, subjectively meaningless past.

Figure 6: Anna Karenina’s biological and discursive life (approximate temporal scale).

The question is: How can we reconcile the disparity between the two unequal periods of Anna’s life—her life with Karenin, and her life with Vronsky—to accurately evaluate Anna’s whole life? Again in very simple terms we can say that objectively Anna’s life is predominantly meaningful as the larger temporal-frame of Anna’s life, her disposition, her choices, actions, her becoming the wife of Karenin, and mother to Seryozha, is valued by the Other; thus the Other should deem Anna’s life predominantly meaningful, despite the abject nature of her affair and her suicide. Indeed, her past life is objectively limiting the influence of her present life over the interpretation and evaluation of the whole of her life. Subjectively, however, Anna’s life is predominantly meaningless as Anna does not value her temporally longer life with Karenin, instead finding meaning with Vronsky. Thus, if Anna’s whole life is to be evaluated subjectively, then her life should be deemed predominantly meaningless.

However, we must of course remember that Anna is not a real person—she is a fictional character, and how she is evaluated as a fictional character differs greatly from
The Middle as the Shaping of Meaning

how we would (or should) evaluate her life if she were a real person. This disparity in evaluation can again be attributed to the corporeal conviction of the “actual,” NOW-story of the novel and how it relates to the meaningfulness of a character. Anna’s past—her life with Karenin—is not given sufficient, qualitative discourse—it is not NOW and it does not “exist” within the pages of the book, except as “incorporeal” memories. It is because of this lack of qualitative discourse that a radical shift occurs in the evaluation of her life: Anna’s subjective meaningful life with Vronsky suddenly becomes the predominant meaningful period of her “whole” life, whereas objectively her life with Vronsky is predominantly meaningless. And yet irrespective of how we interpret Anna, we must understand that, rhetorically, Tolstoy is stating that this NOW-story is the story of Anna Karenina and, therefore, if Anna’s discursive NOW-story is meaningful, then her whole life is meaningful.

This rhetorical influence of corporeal conviction over evaluation can also be illustrated if we compare another “meaningless life” (again a result of a loveless marriage), namely that of Dorothea and the reverend Mr. Casaubon in George Eliot’s Middlemarch. Unlike Anna’s unhappy marriage, which is essentially only alluded to in the discourse of Anna Karenina, a significant volume of the discourse of Middlemarch is given to detailing the story of the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon, with their courtship being essentially the first major event of the plot. Of course, to the dismay of her friends and family, the idealistic, ascetic eighteen-year-old Dorothea accepts the proposal of marriage from the forty-five-year-old Casaubon, a “sallow-faced,” “dried bookworm,” who is engaged in writing his great life-work—a treatise concerning religious history. Dorothea sees in him the best kind of husband, who she believes should be “a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it.” Despite having her own projects in mind, and a strong-willed disposition, Dorothea weds Casaubon and takes upon herself the duties of an aid to his projects, even going so far as to learn Greek, Latin, and Hebrew in order to “save” Casaubon’s eyes. However, some six weeks after their marriage, on a trip to the Vatican to further
Casaubon’s research, Dorothea soon discovers that her marriage to Casaubon is not at all what she had expected, setting the tone for the brief period (approximately one year) of their marriage before Casaubon dies of a form of heart disease. However, Casaubon’s death does not relinquish Dorothea of her sad marriage as Casaubon, on his death-bed, asks Dorothea to complete his work. What is more, in his will, Casaubon, suspicious of his nephew Will Ladislaw, places a codicil which states that Dorothea’s inherited fortune should be taken from her if she and Ladislaw were to wed. However, foregoing her inherited fortune, Dorothea and Ladislaw do wed, and a new life for the two of them begins.

What is significant about this brief summary is that the period of Dorothea’s unhappy marriage to Casaubon dominates the greater part of the discursive volume of Middlemarch. The effect that this has is that it invokes a stronger sense of sympathy for Dorothea, than that for Anna Karenina. The detail given to Dorothea’s unhappy marriage creates a fuller representation, and, consequently, a “fuller” response from the reader. Moreover, this greater volume of discourse also invokes a stronger sense of happiness for Dorothea when she herself is happy in her new life. In contrast, Anna’s past, married life with Karenin, which is not NOW and is not qualitatively discoursed, is far less convincing and so we are not invoked with an overt, sympathetic feeling of happiness for Anna when she meets Vronsky. Indeed, the two stories represent the two “halves” of a whole life: Dorothea, the unhappy marriage before a new happy beginning; Anna, the initial happiness of a new beginning after an unhappy marriage. However, in terms of evaluating Anna’s life, her NOW-story—the short middle of her life—is qualitatively meaningful and supersedes any quantitative evaluation of her whole life. Anna’s whole, meaningful life can be found within the pages of Anna Karenina. The rhetoric of corporeal conviction dismisses her quantitatively meaningless past, for the qualitatively meaningful “present.” Indeed, Anna’s undiscovered life seems more meaningful than Dorothea’s discoursed life simply because Dorothea does not redeem her meaningless life by marrying Ladislaw; in contrast, the meaninglessness of

70 Eliot, Middlemarch, 10.
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Anna’s past is not qualitatively detailed and therefore does not undermine the meaningfulness of her discoursed life.

And yet it must be noted that, unlike the dead life of Anna, we cannot decide on the meaningfulness of Dorothea’s life because she is essentially *ahistorical*. Her life is meaningless within the novel, but this meaninglessness is not determined as she is not yet dead. Unlike Anna, Dorothea theoretically has “time on her side.” She can right her wrongs and lessen the impact of her meaningless past less on her whole life’s meaning. But what does it mean to say that Dorothea has “time on her side” and that she is “ahistorical.” This is clearly a strange sentiment for a fictional character as, although she is not dead, her discoursed story has ended. Here we find a clear discrepancy between the end of a character’s personal narrative and the end of the novel’s discourse, namely that they do not necessarily coincide. This discrepancy will be the subject of discussion in the following chapter in which we will also see how the relationship between the two disparate ends has a significant influence on how the meaning of a character’s life is evaluated by the shivering reader, but also on the shivering reader’s understanding of the meaning of his or her own life and their place in the world.
The End as Death and Closure

Men, like poets, rush “into the middest,” in medius res, when they are born; they also die in mediis rebus, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect the irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths.

—Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending

All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers’ plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children’s games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot.

—Don DeLillo, White Noise

The end of our personal narratives is logically our biological death. And as Heidegger suggests it is also the end of our existence where death is the “end” of our Being-in-the-world. However, the end of our personal narratives entails much more than just a biological or existential limit; it also marks the event of meaningful revelation and a denouement of our past, where the past is “unknotted,” the mystery is solved, and the meaning of life revealed. Death reveals to us what has been for the most part of our lives concealed, as is exemplified by the revelations of the fictional characters of Ivan Ilyich, Mr. Kurtz, and Citizen Kane. But it is not only the revelations of death which make the event of death significant in our meaningful lives. Indeed, it is also the finitude of death and the inevitability of death which are essential for choosing our meaningful projects. This is to say that death is “present” at our beginnings, when we are in the process of choosing our meaningful projects, as when we choose our projects we are
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effectively choosing what meaning we intend to be revealed. This is the eschatological
topology of our personal narratives: we begin our personal narratives with some form of
an end in mind—we begin the *tick* of our lives with the expectation of *tock*. And it is this
expectation of *tock* which also creates a necessary, meaningful limit to our projects.
Indeed, as Winnie Richards states in a conversation between herself and Jack Gladney in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*:

“I think it’s a mistake to lose one’s sense of death, even one’s fear of death. Isn’t death
the boundary we need? Doesn’t it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition?
You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and
meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit.”

This is very much the argument made by many existential philosophers: death is an
essential and necessary event in our lives, especially for our understanding of the
meaning of our lives. More specifically, the finitude of death gives special significance
to the event of death as it is necessary for both our individual *freedom* and for giving
individualised meaning and value to our lives. As Jean-Paul Sartre claims in *Notebooks
for an Ethics*:

Death is [freedom’s] limit, but also a constitutive factor of freedom. . . . If a being were
endowed with a temporal infinity, he could realise every possible, he would therefore be
nothing more than the development in an infinite and necessary series of every possible,
therefore he would disappear as an individuality (the realisation of these possibles to the
exclusion of all the rest) and as freedom (the dangerous and irremediable choice of some
possibles).  

Sartre suggests that if we were each immortal then we would each eventually achieve,
or “take-up,” every possible project, such that no choice or project would be peculiar or

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1 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 234H.
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special to our selves. We would no longer be individualised by the choices we make, or by the projects we undertake, which would remove all value and meaning from their achievement. The meaninglessness of life without death is also discussed by British philosopher Bernard Williams in his examination of the “The Makropulos Case,” a play by Karel Čapek in which the protagonist Elina Makropulos takes an elixir purported to extend her life by three hundred years, thereby effectively giving her an immortal life. However, Elina discovers that her unending, immortal life has amounted to a “state of boredom, indifference and coldness,” and at the age of 342 Elina dies having refused to take the elixir again. It is this description of the tragedy of Elina’s immortal life which prompted Williams to argue that: “Immortality, or a state without death, would be meaningless . . . ; so, in a sense, death gives the meaning to life.” For Williams, death is an event that should not be feared or regarded as an evil, but is an event that should be “embraced” as it is necessary for human happiness and desire. Alphonso Lingis, drawing on Heidegger, makes a similar claim:

My death advances toward me as the brink of the abyss, of utter impossibility. It outlines, in the outlying field of all that is possible in general, for anyone, an expanse of what is yet possible for me. It also reveals, under my feet, resources available to me. The acute sense of my mortality thus illuminates for me an expanse of possibilities possible for me. At the same time the anxiety that throws me back upon myself makes me feel what is unrealised in me, the potentialities and powers that are in me and have remained in suspense. Hence the sense of my vulnerability, contingency, mortality is also the sense of my being, my powers, my singularity.

Death is therefore an important and meaningful event as it completes our subjective lives and gives them meaning and wholeness. Our lives are subjectively meaningful because death limits our possibilities and thereby individualises the meaning of our

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3 Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 326.
4 B. Williams, “The Makropulos Case,” 82.
5 Ibid.
6 Lingis, “To Die with Others,” 108.
The End as Death and Closure

lives. However, for the anxious living, death also creates a boundary for objective interpretation and evaluation: death makes one whole and complete such that we are, as Sartre states, “all done,” and necessarily become a historical dead life, which is to say we become “interpretable.” This is also important for the shivering reader as the reader can interpret and evaluate the whole, dead life of the fictional character—the character that dies within the discourse of the novel—regardless of whether or not the dying character explicitly reveals the meaning of his or her life.

**Endings and Fiction**

However, when discussing the nature of the ends of fictional characters and how the character’s death provides a necessary boundary for the reader’s interpretation and evaluation of the character’s life, we must recognise a disparity between the ends of real life and the ends of fiction—a disparity which is analogous to those discussed in the previous two chapters. In our own lives, we have one “end” which is properly our biological death, and this end is both a revelation and a closure insofar as it reveals meaning and is an existential boundary which makes us complete and whole. In fiction, however, there are two “ends”: the biological death of the fictional character; and the end of the discourse—the end of the character’s NOW-story—which can take the form of a resolution, a denouement, a climax or crescendo. These two endings allow for three distinct combinations of endings: the coinciding of the character’s death with the end of the novel’s NOW-story/discursive end; the discursive end which follows a character’s death; and the discursive end which comes before the character’s death. As we will see, each of these combinations has a significant explicit or implicit influence on how a character is interpreted and evaluated, but also on how the reader understands his or her own life particularly in terms of their in/authentic attitude towards their lives.
1. The Coinciding of Discursive Endings with a Character’s Death

The end of the novel's discourse/NOW-story (e in figure 7, below) and the exact moment of a character's biological end (D) very rarely coincide. Indeed, of the many novels discussed in this thesis none can be said to end at the exact moment of the protagonist's death. Actually, the one example which seems to end by coinciding these two ends is Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, in which the discourse of the NOW-story ends with the line: “He drew in a breath, stopped in the midst of a sigh, stretched out and died.”7 Ivan's biological death is described on the very last line of the final page of the short story. However, we must remember that the very beginning of the discourse of the short story represents the narrative-NOW—the tense in which the narrator is telling the story—and then has a flashback to Ivan's NOW-story, such that his story is told in the preterite. It is also because of the narrative-NOW that the reader comes to know of Ivan's so-called friends' opinions of Ivan upon hearing of Ivan's death. This is significant as Ivan’s death is not the boundary of the interpretation and evaluation of his life within the discourse. This is to say that the duration of the story-time of the discourse does not end with Ivan's death but continues for some duration after his death, such that the other characters' opinions are included and may influence the reader’s understanding of the meaning of the life of Ivan. The reader can see how Ivan’s life was objectively evaluated before coming to know Ivan’s subjective evaluation of his own life. This choice of Tolstoy’s to tell the story in this way may be seen as a rhetorical device employed to further emphasise the meaninglessness of Ivan’s life—a conclusion that is drawn by Ivan himself.

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7 Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 161.
The End as Death and Closure

Figure 7: Coinciding of discursive end with character’s death

Of course, there are also many novels in which the main character dies in the final pages of the novel, such that it would seem that the character’s death and the NOW-story do coincide; however, even in these examples there is the possibility for some final word—a final value-judgment—to be spoken about the deceased character. This judgement may come from a third-person narrator or from another character within the novel left to confer meaning onto the dead life. It is these final judgements which can possibly influence the reader’s own evaluation of the dead character. Indeed, this combination of endings is far more common as is the combination where the NOW-story ends before the protagonist’s (undiscoursed) death. As will now be explained, of the two it is the former which is of the most value to the shivering reader.

2. Discursive Endings that Follow a Character’s Death

Typically (and necessarily) autobiographical first-person narration ends before the character’s death, simply because the autobiographer cannot write his or her own death or their dying revelations, rendering it impossible to end the NOW-story after their death. However, it is possible for an omniscient, third-person narrator to “live on” after the protagonist has died such that the NOW-story ends after the character’s death (see figure 8, below). Indeed, third-person narrators are the biographers left to finish
The End as Death and Closure
the stories for those who can’t. The obvious advantage of this ending to the shivering reader is that the story of the life of the character can be completed and becomes a historical dead life. This dead life can therefore be interpreted and evaluated by the reader with a sense of accuracy.

![Figure 8: Character's death before novel's discursive/NOW-story end](image)

However, as was intimated above, the significance of this combination of endings is that, because the discourse continues for some duration after the character’s death, there is also the possibility of rhetorical influence on the reader’s evaluation of the deceased character, particularly if characters and narrators “remain” to evaluate the deceased character’s life and explicitly or implicitly communicate these evaluations to the reader. We see this combination of ending in *Hamlet* when, following Hamlet’s death, Horatio says: “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince, / And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” Very simply, Horatio imparts to the viewer his evaluation of the life of Hamlet and thereby influences the viewer’s own evaluation of Hamlet. Two novels that exemplify this rhetorical influence by continuing the NOW-story of the novel for some duration after the death of their respective protagonists are again Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (the story of Anna Karenina) and Conrad’s *Nostromo* (the story of Nostromo). The rhetorical influence of the respective novelists is particularly evidenced in how “secondary” characters—characters that live on after the respective protagonists’ deaths (specifically Levin and Kitty in *Anna Karenina*, and Mrs. Gould in *Nostromo*)—become the “superior final arbiters” of the deceased character’s lives. Indeed, these surviving characters are the “moral compasses” for a meaningful
The End as Death and Closure

life, and implicitly or explicitly determine the “meaningfulness” of the deceased protagonists' lives.

Anna Karenina

Anna Karenina's final action of her life is her suicide, an action which is unwitnessed except by the omniscient narrator and the “omniscient” reader via the narrator. Anna believes that she can redeem her tragic life and make herself a martyr by taking her own life. However, the novel and the NOW-story of Anna Karenina does not end with Anna's death: the final part of Anna Karenina takes the form of an epilogue, which takes place some two months after Anna’s death. And it is here that the NOW-story returns to the story of Levin. The significance of including this final chapter is that it both explicitly and implicitly provides an objective evaluation of the meaning of Anna’s dead life. The former is evidenced by Tolstoy’s inclusion of a comment made by Vronsky’s mother: “‘Yes, she ended as such a woman should have ended. Even the death she chose was mean and low.’”8 The question we may ask is why does Tolstoy include Vronsky’s mother’s value judgment within the discourse? One possible reason is that it is a rhetorical device employed by Tolstoy to further illustrate the ills of society and its propensity for scandal, hypocrisy, and prejudice.9 Indeed, it can be argued that the reader forgives Anna’s action, and understands and sees her life as subjectively meaningful, whilst an ignorant society does not.10

However, this comment made by Vronsky’s mother pales in significance when compared to Tolstoy’s “implicit” commentary, which is demonstrated by the fact that

8 Tolstoy, Anna Karenina, 778.
9 Thorlby, Leo Tolstoy: Anna Karenina, 21.
10 Interestingly, Moretti (The Way of the World, 188) describes how the theme of adultery is dealt with in the narrative traditions of France, Germany, America, and Russia, but is not dealt with in England, citing Jane Eyre as a prime example. The reason for this, Moretti claims, is that the ethical dichotomies of England did not tolerate ambiguous situations such as adultery, and, when the existence of Bertha Mason is revealed, Jane must therefore flee from the possibility of becoming an adulteress and begin her life again. In Anna Karenina's case, the ambiguity of the situation is brought to the foreground by illustrating various points of view and the Other’s opinions of her adultery.
The End as Death and Closure

where the character Anna Karenina dies within the discourse of Anna Karenina, the character of Levin lives on at the “end” of the discourse. It can be argued that this contrast enables Tolstoy to better illuminate his “moral realism,” particularly in terms of the value of love and marriage for a meaningful life. As was stated above, for Tolstoy, married life is tantamount to a good and meaningful life—marriage which provides a unifying centre and a home to nourish the relationship. As Anthony Thorlby suggests:

[Anna] lacks what was for Tolstoy the ideal and necessary centre of all human relationships, including the relationship of self through memory to its own past: she lacks a home. The imaginative significance of this lack for Tolstoy was so great that Anna is felt to be in jeopardy not only as regards her position in society, but in her life altogether. There is nothing for her to become, her love exists in a kind of vacuum, and cannot grow. Here the contrast with Levin and Kitty is particularly telling: their relationship can and does grow, they have in their family life more to occupy and sustain them than just their feelings for one another. Anna has only her love for Vronsky, and she is utterly vulnerable to every kind of doubt about his love for her; her happiness is always fragile and at risk, until the struggle against unhappiness becomes unendurable and overwhelms her. In the context of Tolstoy’s moral realism, there is ultimately no place for the passion that consumes Anna.\(^{12}\)

Anna’s life ends because her project has ended—she cannot grow—and despite her actual death she is already a dead life. In contrast, Levin continues to become who he is to become, and his love for Kitty can grow. However, the fact that Levin lives on also suggests the superiority of Levin; indeed, it almost suggests that Levin’s love for Kitty overcomes death, or as Henri Troyat suggests conquers life: “Anna Karenina and Vronsky are swept from the scene, leaving behind them the mighty conquerors in the battle of life: Kitty and Levin.”\(^{13}\) Levin survives, and he is left to categorise the dead—

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 22.
\(^{13}\) Troyat, Tolstoy, 512.
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he is superior to the dead and it is his voice which is the authoritative voice of Tolstoy’s morality. Levin is the moral compass and it would seem that Tolstoy implies that Levin’s life is a life to which one should aspire; but also a life one should choose in order to overcome the negative categorisation of the Other.

Nostromo

A similar example to the contrasting stories of Anna and Levin—where the NOW-story ends after the character’s death—is the contrasting stories of Nostromo and Mrs. Gould in Conrad’s Nostromo. However, the story of Nostromo is somewhat different in its structure to that of Anna Karenina as the epilogue, which would normally follow Nostromo’s death, comes before the event of his death as a “flashforward” (prolepsis) and breaks the linear story-flow. The main action of this chapter surrounds what has become the common occurrence of Captain Mitchell retelling the historical events of Sulaco’s past to distinguished strangers visiting Sulaco. Not only does Captain Mitchell identify significant places and structures, and their relation to Sulaco’s past, but also “remembers” Nostromo and his heroic actions:

“The equestrian statue that used to stand on the pedestal over there has been removed. It was an anachronism,” Captain Mitchell commented obscurely. “There is some talk of replacing it by a marble shaft commemorative of Separation, with angels of peace at the four corners, and a bronze Justice holding an even balance, all gilt, on the top. Cavaliere Parrochetti was asked to make a design, which you can see framed under glass in the Municipal Sala. Names are to be engraved all round the base. Well! They could do no better than begin with the name of Nostromo. He has done for Separation as much as anybody else, and,” added Captain Mitchell, “has got less than many others by it—when it comes to that.” He dropped on to a stone seat under a tree, and tapped invitingly at the place by his side. “He carried to Barrios the letters from Sulaco which

14 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 64.
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decided the General to evacuate Catya for a time, and come to our help here by sea. . . .
The history of that ride, sir, would make a most exciting book. He carried all our lives in
his pocket. Devotion, courage, fidelity, intelligence were not enough. Of course, he was
perfectly fearless and incorruptible. But a man was wanted that would know how to
succeed. He was that man, sir.”

What is significant about Captain Mitchell’s praise is that Nostromo’s incorruptibility is
an ironic fallacy, a fallacy which is known only by Mrs. Gould and the omniscient
reader. Nostromo is corruptible, as is evidenced by his attempt to keep the silver of the
mine for himself, whilst allowing everyone to believe that it had been lost at sea. The
omniscient reader knows of this fallacy before Mrs. Gould who only learns of
Nostromo’s secret when he confesses it to her on his death-bed. And it is just after
Nostromo’s death, whilst comforting the grieving Giselle, that Mrs. Gould discloses her
feelings towards Nostromo’s life:

“Console yourself, child. Very soon he would have forgotten you for his treasure.”

“Señora, he loved me. He loved me,” Giselle whispered, despairingly. “He loved me
as no one had ever been loved before.”

“I have been loved too,” Mrs. Gould said in a severe tone.

Mrs Gould states very clearly the meaninglessness of “material interests”—interests
which have haunted both Nostromo and her husband. Mrs. Gould is the moral
compass of Nostromo and it is to her evaluation of Nostromo’s life that the reader
should acquiesce.

But as we have done in our analysis of Anna Karenina, the question we must
again ask is: Why is the chapter on the period after Nostromo’s death, and after Mrs.
Gould’s comments included? One of the possible answers to this question is that this
epilogue of Nostromo’s life somewhat redeems the absurdity of his life. All of

15 Conrad, Nostromo, 381–82.
16 Ibid., 443.
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Nostromo’s projects were rendered absurd by his betrayal, but in death some reconciliation is made insofar as the action of Captain Mitchell remembering Nostromo “rewards” Nostromo with the Other’s continued praise. This is the intended meaning of Nostromo’s project, a project which remained incomplete in his lived life. In death, however, his project is in a sense complete, even if Nostromo himself did not see it come to pass. Nostromo seems to overcome absurdity as he achieves the meaning he initially intended to create. However, this overcoming is of course not solely Nostromo’s doing. It is Mrs. Gould who keeps his confession secret and it is Mrs. Gould that confers meaning onto Nostromo’s dead life, a valued meaning but nevertheless a false meaning. And Nostromo’s life is absurd as it is Mrs. Gould who is responsible for making Nostromo’s life meaningful. What is more, Mrs. Gould’s choice to withhold the truth of Nostromo’s life has the secondary effect of converting Nostromo’s life into a political and social tool—a tool which is necessary for maintaining the image and well-being of Sulaco. As Edward W. Said writes in *Beginnings*:

> Only Mrs. Gould knows Sulaco for what it is, but she can never make her knowledge effective. Her moment of greatest understanding and illumination is also her moment of least practical influence. Yet she knows that it is possible for the integrity and courage of one person to sustain the life of a nation. So, as Nostromo once saved Sulaco with his daring ride (although he had already by then dishonoured himself), now she preserves Sulaco’s record by withholding a secret certain to dishonour the country. Here, the refusal to be an author is a quality worthy of admiration.¹⁷

Mrs. Gould intentionally or unintentionally equates Nostromo’s life with that of an object, to be utilised by the Other. His subjective meaningful life has been completely alienated by the objective Other, which again reinforces his absurdity.

The discourse/NOW-stories of both *Anna Karenina* and *Nostromo* end by elevating what is often a secondary character into the position of superior final arbiter—the living character is left to confer meaning onto the deceased character’s life, effectively rendering the character’s life absurd. However, there is also another form of absurdity which is rhetorically implied by the novelists’ choices to continue their respective novel’s NOW-stories for some duration after their character’s death: this is the absurdity of life in an unending, infinite, and indifferent world, or as Yugoslavian-born philosopher Thomas Nagel states, we are absurd because of our relation to the immeasurable dimensions of space and time of the universe: “We are tiny specks in the infinite vastness of the universe; our lives are mere instants even on a geological time scale, let alone a cosmic one; we will all be dead any minute.”  

American philosopher Richard Taylor makes a similar claim when he suggests that our lives are properly Sisyphean as they are each marked by the element of “repetitious, cyclic activity that never comes to anything.” This interpretation of humankind’s absurdity is exemplified by the story of Stan Parker from Patrick White’s *The Tree of Man*, the beginning of which we have already discussed. Stan dies in the penultimate chapter of the novel with his wife Amy by his side; the chapter ends with her words: “Stan is dead. My husband. In the boundless garden.” This ending would seem satisfactory in the closure of a novel which begins with Stan’s existential beginning and ends with his death, creating the necessary boundaries for the interpretation and evaluation of a full, meaningful life; however, the NOW-story does not end with Stan’s death: there is a final chapter, no more than two pages, in which the main action focuses on Stan’s grandson walking amongst the trees of the bush thinking of a poem he will write—“a poem of life, of all life, of what he did not know, but knew.” But it is the final paragraph

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20 White, *The Tree of Man*, 478.
21 Ibid., 480.
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of this last chapter which is of the most significance to the meaning of the novel and the
meaning of Stan’s life:

So that in the end there were the trees. The boy walking through them with his head
drooping as he increased in stature. Putting out shoots of green thought. So that, in the
end, there was no end.22

In *Patrick White’s Fiction*, Carolyn Bliss says of this passage:

[Stan’s] story and the novel begin and end with trees. When he first arrives in the virgin
bushland he will settle, two trees form the gate which admits him. He makes his first mark
on the wilderness by scarring a tree with his axe, and later fells many. Yet, even after his
death, the trees remain. As Stan’s young grandson walks among them, White says that
the child “could not believe in death,” and, as he thinks of the “poem of life” he will write,
he is described as “Putting out shoots of green thought. So that, in the end, there was no
end.” Like the trees, the boy will grow, blossom, and propagate. According to the
Housman poem from which the novel’s title is drawn, “The tree of man was never quiet,”
and its saplings are bent double by the gale of time. But man, for whom the tree stands
as metaphor, will survive to reproduce himself, to ensure that there is no end.23

Bliss suggests that this metaphor signifies that humankind will continue by its
reproduction such that it will not end. Humankind keeps itself in existence by
perpetuating existence. However, underlying this metaphor is a secondary metaphor
which signifies the perennial, unending nature of the trees—of the world and
universe—a contrast to the individual’s and, indeed, humankind’s temporary, mortal
existence. Humankind may reproduce itself, but the subjective, meaningful life of the
individual must end and has no consequence on the world that continues to exist. Just
as the discourse continued after Stan’s death, so too did the world and time, thereby
emphasising the absurdity of his life.

22 Ibid.
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But what is also significant about the story of Stan Parker, and also the stories of Anna Karenina and Nostromo, is not only are they each marked by absurdity but their stories (unintentionally or not) compel the reader to recognise his or her own absurdity. Indeed, what we have previously described as the “gift” of ironic fiction in the evaluation of the meaningful projects of the Other—specifically, the gift of superior arbitration—also “haunts” the authentic reader. The authentic reader—the reader who is “aware” of his or her own ironic mode—is haunted by the same spectre of absurdity as the characters they themselves have read about and have evaluated. It is novels such as Anna Karenina, Nostromo, and The Tree of Man—in which the NOW-stories do not end with their respective characters’ death—that intentionally or unintentionally reveal the absurdity of the reader. Indeed, if we again consider the story of Levin from Anna Karenina and his “overcoming” of the absurdity of life, we must recognise that this is somewhat of a false “overcoming” as Tolstoy’s inclusion of Vronsky’s mother’s comments can be interpreted as an affirmation of the absurdity of Anna’s death: the Other—Vronsky’s mother—remains to evaluate the lives of the deceased—Anna—and confer meaning onto their lives. The deceased Anna cannot give the lie to Vronsky’s mother’s evaluation and conferral of meaning. Moreover, despite the illusion that Levin “lives on” and seems to overcome the same absurdity, in reality he and the “superior” reader will necessarily become prey to the Other’s categorisation just as Vronsky’s mother and the reader categorise Anna. In this way, Tolstoy somewhat unintentionally promotes the attitude of inauthenticity towards the absurdity of life which comes from the conferral of meaning by the Other. The authentic reader, however, recognises, and is haunted by, this absurdity.

23 Bliss, Patrick White’s Fiction, 51.
3. Discursive Endings which come before a Character’s Death

The examples of the stories of Anna Karenina, Nostromo, and Stan Parker represent the combination of the two “endings” of fiction where the discursive end comes after the character’s biological death. However, just as common, if not more common, is the combination of endings where the discursive end of the story comes before the character’s death. It would seem that this combination of endings would be of little value to the reader as the character is not completed within the novel’s pages and therefore cannot be accurately interpreted or evaluated. However, in “The Storyteller” Walter Benjamin claims that the shivering reader can warm him or herself with these incomplete characters as the characters experience “figurative” death (FD in figure 9, below)—a discursive death which essentially completes the character and enables the reader to interpret and evaluate the character as a “figuratively” dead life. As Benjamin claims, for the shivering reader to be warmed by the novel’s representation of the fictional Other, the reader

must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share [the character in a novel’s] experience of death: if need be their figurative death—the end of the novel—but preferably their actual one.24

Benjamin seems to suggest that the discursive/NOW-story end—the punctuated period which follows the final word on the final page—is essentially as valuable a boundary for interpreting the figurative dead life of the fictional Other as the event of biological death. Indeed, Benjamin says it is only preferable that the character biologically dies in the novel.
The concept of figurative death can be understood in at least two ways, both of which relate to the sense of closure in the novel. The first is that a character’s figurative death is a reflection of the narrator’s/novelist’s “attitude” towards his or her characters and how and when their story should be brought to a close, thereby completing the novel and giving the novel its structure. A second way of understanding the figurative death of a character specifically relates to the reader’s reading process insofar as the reader does not anticipate that the realist character “lives on” after the end of the novel and therefore does not speculate on the character’s future. Similarly, Hochman states: “If the characters in literature are like people at all, in the ordinary sense, they are like dead people. The characters in literature, once they are ‘written,’ are finished like the dead.” The result is that, rather than anticipating the “living” character’s future, the reader looks back over the character’s life in the same way that the dying look back over his or her life as a “life review.” As will be explained, this reading process is very much a result of the “geometry” of the novel and the “retrospective patterning” of the novel which obviates the need for speculation on the future of a character, thereby rendering the character figuratively dead.

25 Hochman, Character in Literature, 60.
The concept of figurative death can primarily be understood by the manner in which the reader reads and the expectation of an end to the novel. As Forster writes, it is natural for a reader to question what will come next in a story:

We are all like Scheherazade’s husband, in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal and that is why the backbone of a novel has to be a story. Some of us want to know nothing else—there is nothing in us but primeval curiosity, and consequently our other literary judgements are ludicrous.  

Forster touches upon a very human trait: a curiosity of what will happen next. But it is also a curiosity as to how a story will end and what will become of all this “effort” of reading, which somewhat reflects our own curiosity of what will become of the effort of our own actions to achieve our intended projects. Marianna Torgovnick makes a similar claim in *Closure in the Novel* but also highlights the “practicality” of endings for the reading process:

In any narrative, “what happens next” ceases to be a pertinent question only at the conclusion, and the word “end” in a novel consequently carries with it not just the notion of the turnable last page, but also that of the “goal” of reading, the finish-line toward which our bookmarks aim. In long works of fiction, endings are important for another commonplace but true reason: it is difficult to recall all of a work after a completed reading, but climactic moments, dramatic scenes, and beginnings and endings remain in the memory and decisively shape our sense of a novel as a whole.  

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27 Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel*, 3–4. Torgovnick makes a further interesting point with regards to the reader’s desire to know what happens next in a novel: “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. Since first readings involve the continuous making and revision of
The story of the novel maintains the reader’s interest and feeds the reader’s need to know what will become of the novel’s characters and their stories, and to see how their lives will come to an end, be it a biological or figurative end. This expectation for not only an end but closure and meaning is explained by a number of narrative theories, including Kermode’s description of the sounds *tick-tock* being the model of the plot, where the *tick* (the beginning) creates the expectation of *tock* (an ending). However, a more pertinent theory for the present discussion is Roland Barthes’ description of the *readerly* text. Barthes suggests that the readerly text (which is essentially the realist or “classic” novel) ends on a signified, giving a final meaning to the innumerable signifiers or words used to represent the past life of the fictional character. Further, the readerly text has a definite discursive beginning and ending. These discursive beginnings and endings “enclose”—give boundaries to—the words, the signifiers—the raw story material—used by the narrator to describe a character (or by which the character describes themselves), and from which meaning—a final signified—can be determined. The signified gives meaning to the expectations of the signifiers. This is very similar to one’s own existence; but unlike death, which as Sartre states is unforeseeable, one can see the end of the novel—the character’s death—regardless of whether the character actually dies or only figuratively dies. Death becomes determined and foreseeable as pages which impose limitations to the character’s life and therefore determine the character’s meaning.

However, this final determination of meaning can also be understood not only as a structural trait but as something reflected in the *attitude* of the narrator—an attitude which reflects closure and completes the character. It is because of this guesses, first readings are like the process of living from moment to moment in the present. Second or subsequent readings—when the question of ‘what happens next’ no longer pertains with urgency—differ fundamentally from first readings and resemble the ways in which we experience the past. Upon rereading, pattern and rhythm—connections between beginning, middle, and end—may be more easily discerned and more fully understood by the reader.” Ibid., 8. This description of the reading process is significant if we consider that the anxious reader—who is perplexed about his or her own life’s meaning—is similarly perplexed during his or her first reading of a novel; however, unlike their own “singular” life, the reader can reread and re-
attitude that the “living” character enters his or her figurative death. One of the most pertinent examples for illustrating this relation between the attitude of the narrator and the concept of figurative death is the story of Jane Eyre in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. The final chapter of *Jane Eyre* begins with her declaration that she married the blind and crippled Rochester and it is this choice which is essentially one of her final choices and actions within the NOW-story. But, of course, Jane does not die at the end of the novel and is, therefore, theoretically not complete and whole; theoretically she is an *ahistorical* being. However, the discourse and the NOW-story has ended such that Jane can be said to enter her figurative death. But it is not simply because the discourse/NOW-story ends that makes Jane figuratively dead; it is understood by her attitude towards her “present” life (the end of the discoursed NOW-story) which she discloses in one of the closing passages of the final chapter:

> My tale draws to its close: one word respecting my experience of married life, and one brief glance at the fortunes of those whose names have most frequently recurred in this narrative, and I have done.

> I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest—blest beyond what language can express; because I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. I know no weariness of my Edward’s society: he knows none of mine, any more than we each do of the pulsation of the heart that beats in our separate bosoms; consequently, we are ever together. To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking. All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord is the result.  

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In themselves, the words Jane chooses to tell the end of her story suggest a sense of closure and harmony necessary for ending the story of a novel. Jane writes that her “tale draws to its close: . . . and one brief glance at the fortunes of those whose names have most frequently recurred in this narrative, and I have done.” This sentence figuratively signifies the closure of her autobiographical story; however, it also signifies the closure of her life and her (personal) narrative. Indeed, consider the ominous similarity between Jane’s phrase “and I have done” and Sartre’s claim that “the dead life . . . is all done.” But, the sense of an ending of Jane’s personal narrative is also exemplified by Jane’s choice of words and phrases in relation to her thoughts and feelings towards her present life—the moment in which she began writing her history. Jane uses words such as: “entirely,” “supremely,” “fully,” “absolutely”; and phrases such as: “know no weariness”; “we are ever together”; “all my confidence”; and “perfect concord is the result.”

Jane talks of her life in absolute terms: the state of her life, at the moment of writing, is eternal and complete. Moreover, her life is essentially historical as, from this moment on, she (implicitly) expects her life to be unchanging and static. Jane need no longer choose her meaningful projects because she has become who she was to become. Here we are reminded of Ortega’s claim that “the most trivial and at the same time the most important note in human life is that man has no choice but to be always doing something to keep himself in existence.” Jane has no need to make any further choices to give meaning to her life and so her existence “ends.” Indeed, Jane’s choosing to write her story at that particular moment in her life signifies a readiness to represent a complete history of her life. Compare this “readiness for completion” to the previously used example of Ginés de Pasamonte, from Cervantes’s Don Quixote, who explicitly states that his book is not finished because his life has not finished: unlike Ginés de Pasamonte, Jane Eyre makes no such claim as her book and, indeed, her life are both “finished.”

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29 All my emphasis.
30 Ortega y Gasset, “History as a System,” 165.
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A similar example to the figurative death of Jane Eyre is that of Emma Woodhouse in Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815). However, the significant difference between Emma’s figurative death and Jane Eyre’s figurative death is that where Jane “determines” her own figurative death by her own words, Emma’s end is determined by a third-person narrator. In the final chapter of *Emma*, Emma realises that she is in love with Mr. Knightley, and they soon wed—an event which is described in the final paragraph of the final page of the novel:

The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own.—“Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business!—Selina would stare when she heard of it.”—But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union.31

Emma’s NOW-story ends with her wedding and the “perfect happiness of the union.” These words, spoken by the third-person narrator, suggest “perfection,” “unity,” but also “wholeness,” and “completion.” And it is these words that determine Emma’s figurative death as they represent the narrator’s attitude towards Emma’s life—an attitude which suggests that Emma’s life, which is said to proceed after the wedding, has essentially become static and that nothing shall disrupt Emma’s perfect (meaningful) union with Mr. Knightley. Thus, Emma has entered her figurative death and has become a complete and historical being.32 And she can be interpreted and

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32 Interestingly, E. M. Forster makes the somewhat humorous and, indeed, ominous observation that biological death and marriage have a special relationship insofar as they are the most common endings for the novel: “If it was not for death and marriage I do not know how the average novelist would conclude. Death and marriage are almost his only connection between his characters and hisplot, and the reader is more ready to meet him here, and take a bookish view of them, provided they occur later on in the book; the writer, poor fellow, must be allowed to finish up somehow, he has his living to get like any one else, so no wonder that nothing is heard but hammering and screwing.” Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 94.
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evaluated by the reader as if she were biologically dead. The reader can confer meaning onto the figuratively dead life of Emma.

But the attitudes of both Jane Eyre and the third-person narrator of *Emma* are not necessarily special to fiction (or to the “function” of the end of fiction insofar as the end is to signify closure and stasis). There are two ways in which we can understand this type of ending: the first is that it is symbolic of socialisation in the *Bildungsroman*—specifically the socialisation of marriage; the second is “social death.” The former is described by Moretti and it again relates to the socialisation of the character and the synthesis of the individual with the expectations of normality in society. Moretti asks the question: “How is it possible to convince the modern—‘free’—individual to willingly limit his freedom?” The answer, Moretti suggests, is “in marriage: when two people ascribe to one another such value as to accept being ‘bound’ by it.” Moretti explains this in terms of marriage as a social contract:

It has been observed that from the late eighteenth century on, marriage becomes the model for a new type of social contract: one no longer sealed by forces located outside of the individual (such as status), but founded on a sense of “individual obligation.” A very plausible thesis, and one that helps us understand why the classical *Bildungsroman* “must” always conclude with marriages. It is not only the foundation of the family that is at stake, but the “pact” between the individual and the world, that reciprocal “consent” which finds in the double “I do” of the wedding ritual an unsurpassed symbolic condensation.  

Moretti adds that if the classical *Bildungsroman* does not end with a wedding then the protagonist must leave social life altogether. Again the dichotomies of the *Bildungsroman*, particularly the English *Bildungsroman*, are clearly evident: one either marries or flees society in disgrace. However, it is this claim which is most interesting for our discussion on figurative death insofar as love and marriage, and the attitude that springs from this union, has a rather disturbing relation to the real world as a

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34 Ibid., 23.
character’s figurative death, brought about by marriage, can also be seen as a mode of “fleeing from society.” This is evident if we consider how the combination of marriage and endings in the novel is somewhat similar to the phenomenon of social death. Social death is a psychological disengagement process whereby the dying individual has accepted that the dying process is “inevitable, universal and triggered by an awareness of proximity to death.” It is because of this disengagement process that the dying individual is considered dead by him or herself as they lose interest in their usual activities; they desire to be left alone and avoid learning of news and problems of the outside world. But the socially dead are also considered dead by society in terms of his or her role in society. This attitude of the living towards the dying is also reflected in the living’s avoidance of the dying. Here we are reminded of Benjamin’s claim that the modern world desires to hide the dying away in sanatoria and hospitals to avoid the sight of the dying. It is this attitude of the living which brings about the dying’s social death.

A fictional example that best illustrates the sense of stasis and disengagement of social death can be found in William Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying (1935). As I Lay Dying is the story of the Bundren family who have the grim task of transporting the deceased body of Addie Bundren—the matriarch of the family, wife of Anse Bundren, and mother to three sons and one daughter, Dewey Dell—to Jefferson, the town in which she asked to be buried, which is some forty miles away. The story takes place over approximately eleven days: the two days before Addie dies, and the nine days afterwards, which is the time it takes to get Addie’s body to Jefferson. In the days before her death, Addie’s eldest son Cash is preparing for her death by making her coffin. Though not-yet dead, Addie can hear her son Cash as he works on the coffin—the “Chuck Chuck Chuck of the adze,” which is described by Darl, Addie’s second eldest son. Addie’s third son, Jewel, also describes the morbid pride of Cash as he builds Addie’s coffin:

36 Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying, 100.
It’s because he stays out there, right under the window, hammering and sawing on that goddamn box. Where she’s got to see him. Where every breath she draws is full of his knocking and sawing where she can see him saying See. See what a good one I am making for you. I told him to go somewhere else. I said Good God do you want to see her in it. . . .

And now them others sitting there, like buzzards. Waiting, fanning themselves. Because I said If you wouldn’t keep on sawing and nailing at it until a man can’t sleep even and her hands laying on the quilt like two of them roots dug up and tried to wash and you couldn’t get them clean. I can see the fan and Dewey Dell’s arm. I said if you’d just let her alone. Sawing and knocking, and keeping the air always moving so fast on her face that when you’re tired you can’t breathe it, and that goddamn adze going One lick less. One lick less until everybody that passes in the road will have to stop and see it and say what a fine carpenter he is.38

Addie’s death is imminent and she is considered socially dead by her husband and her children: she is both an object and an objective observer of the living world, all but “physically” removed from subjective, meaningful life. Her life is in stasis insofar as she no longer chooses her action or acts; and she is closed and historical. However, it is not only the description of Addie’s social death that makes Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying a pertinent example but because of how Addie’s story is told. Faulkner’s narrative style in As I Lay Dying is to use not one authoritative, first- or third-person narrator but a number of first-person narrators, specifically fifteen character-narrators to whom Faulkner allots one or more chapters of the story. What is significant about this choice is that the story is told almost exclusively from the point of view of everyone except Addie who has only one chapter dedicated to her. In this one chapter, Addie summarises her past: her marriage, the birth of her children, and her illicit affair with Whitfield from which she has a son, Jewel. She also describes how her father once told

37 Faulkner, As I Lay Dying, 2.
38 Ibid., 11.
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her: “The reason for living is getting ready to stay dead.”

For Addie, living is to prepare for death; and Addie is prepared to die—she has “cleaned her house.”

However, the most telling words spoken by Addie do not appear within this one chapter but are spoken in the title of the novel—“As I Lay Dying”—a statement which can be interpreted as meaning: “As I lay dying, the world continues on around me.” It signifies Addie’s lack of willingness to participate in the life that is being lead outside of her room—outside of her life. Addie is disengaged from the present but also her future.

Moreover, Faulkner’s choice to predominantly exclude Addie from the narration of As I Lay Dying implicitly suggests that she no longer has a voice of “value” for the living. And Addie no longer has a “living voice,” which is to say that she no longer has a voice to give lie to what the Other confers onto her life. She is no longer “ahead” of the Other and can no longer contradict and undermine the meanings interpreted and conferred onto her life by the Other. She is a historical being-for-others—an object—despite her continued existence.

From this description of Addie’s social death we can make a connection to the figurative deaths of Jane Eyre and Emma: both characters experience a metaphorical disengagement as both Jane Eyre and Emma become “disengaged” from their future selves. Jane Eyre does not see a future for herself, nor does the narrator of Emma see a future for Emma: they do not entertain that they will act any differently or diverge from the course which has been determined by the final actions of their stories. What is more, just as in reality, their attitude towards their respective socially dead lives is imparted to the reader, such that, like both Jane and the narrator of Emma, the reader sees the respective characters’ lives as socially dead—the reader sees them as static, closed, and historical. They no longer have an active role in any capacity of social life, or, indeed, in their own lives. Further, they appear to “exist” but they are unchanging; and so they can be considered figuratively dead. Jane Eyre and Emma have entered into a mode of stasis and, indeed, the final words of their respective discourses are

39 Ibid., 164.
40 Ibid.
very much stasis statements of their individual futures—the duration between the end of their discoursed NOW-stories and their future biological deaths.

What is more, the sense of stasis of Jane Eyre and Emma is further emphasised if we consider that, in reality, a non-fictional narrator could not state with the same conviction as that of Jane Eyre that his or her life is complete and static, irrespective of what possibilities the future may hold. This is because one’s future is inescapably subject to contingency: one cannot avoid change or the unforeseen possibilities which may come in the future. However, unlike our own futures, the futures of Jane Eyre and Emma, as fictional characters, must be understood differently. Jane’s and Emma’s stories are each enclosed by a corporeal boundary which can be said undermine the appearance that Jane Eyre and Emma have any future existence—existence, which in reality would be subject to contingency. This is to say that both Jane Eyre’s and Emma’s futures lack corporeal conviction as their future possibilities do not physically exist within the pages of the novel—the pages which essentially represent the complete meaningful story of Jane Eyre and Emma. What is within the pages of the novel is closed, complete and meaningful; the future, however, which lies beyond the pages of the novel, lacks conviction and would do little to undermine this closure. Indeed, it must be noted that, in reality, only the present “exists”—the past and future, however, do not; however, in fiction, only the future of a character does not exist; but the character’s past does “exist”: the character’s past can be seen and held in the hand as a complete and whole corporeal object. It has what Henry James describes as a “visibly-appointed stopping-place” (emphasis mine)—a visible, physical end which signifies the “end” of the existence of the book but also the end of the existence of its characters.

But we can also understand the link between corporeality and the closure of figurative death in another way: between the corporeal end of the novel and the character’s unforeseen future death is a void—a void which is “unintelligible” to the reader, much like Kermode’s description of the silent, empty interval between tock-tick. To make the life of the character intelligible for the reader—to close the character and
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the novel and make the character whole—the character's death must be brought "forward" (as indicted by the arrow in figure 10, below) to the end of the discoursed NOW-story such that they coincide.

![Figure 10: Character's biological death brought forward to become figurative death](image)

This is of course contrary to how we understand our own existence, especially if we consider Sartre’s description of the relation between my future being and my present being.

I am not the self which I will be. First I am not that self because time separates me from it. Secondly, I am not that self because what I am is not the foundation of what I will be. Finally I am not that self because no actual existent can determine strictly what I am going to be. Yet as I am already what I will be (otherwise I would not be interested in any one being more than another), I am the self which I will be, in the mode of not being it. ④¹

Sartre describes how one's future self is related to one's present self as they are connected by the existence of the for-itself. But the future self has no bearing on who the present self is. However, fictional characters such as Jane Eyre and Emma do not have a future or a future self insofar as their existence has entered into a mode of stasis—nothing will change between the end of the discourse and their hypothetical biological deaths: their stories end with the end of the discourse, and they have become the selves that they will become. Their future selves and their biological deaths

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must coincide with the discursive end of their stories to make them whole and complete.

What should be noted here is that this process of social death does not take place only at the end of the novel: it can also take place towards the beginning of the novel, especially in novels where the main protagonist’s story is not the only story being told. This process is exemplified in D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* (1915). The temporal range of *The Rainbow* spans some four generations of the Brangwen family. More specifically, the temporal range encompasses three lives: Tom Brangwen, Anna Brangwen (Tom’s step-daughter), and Ursula Brangwen (Anna’s daughter). The three lives combine to form a sequence of three consecutive and interrelated *Bildungsroman* plots, or three consecutive *tick-tock* plots, within the one novel.

The first story centres on Tom—the fourth son of the unnamed Mr and Mrs Brangwen—but also includes the lives of Lydia—a Polish widow who he meets and weds in the first chapter—and Lydia’s daughter, Anna, from her previous marriage. The story of Tom and Lydia dominates the early part of the novel with the first three of the sixteen chapters of *The Rainbow* dedicated to their courtship and marriage. The couple soon realise that they are “strangers” to each other, such that their marriage is always engaged in a struggle for power of “ownership” or it is one of distance and silence and fear. There is also the difficulties for Tom of embracing a child who is not his own. But, after two years of marriage, Tom finally begins to relinquish his fears and embraces their relationship—both his and Lydia’s and his and Anna’s. The turmoil of the past two years ends and the happy stasis of marriage begins, which is recognised by themselves, and by their daughter Anna:

The days went on as before, Brangwen went out to his work, his wife nursed her child and attended in some measure to the farm. They did not think of each other—why should they? Only when she touched him, he knew her instantly, that she was with him, near him, that she was the gateway and the way out, that she was beyond, and that he was travelling in her through the beyond. Whither?—What does it matter? He responded
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always. When she called, he answered, when he asked, her response came at once, or at length.

Anna’s soul was put at peace between them. She looked from one to the other, and saw them established to her safety, and she was free. She played between the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud in confidence, having the assurance on her right hand and the assurance on her left. She was no longer called upon to uphold with her childish might the broken end of the arch. Her father and her mother now met to the span of the heavens, and she, the child, was free to play in the space beneath, between. 42

This description in itself could be a fitting end to the tick-tock novel. Of course where the tock ends, the new tick of Anna’s life begins or will begin. In Tom and Lydia’s eyes, and in their daughter’s eyes, they have become complete and whole. But they are also in a sense socially dead, not quite in the same way as Emma and Jane Eyre, where the end of the novel brings about their social death such that they become static and “determined,” but in the sense that, whilst they continue to live in the novel, their future choices and actions are less influential to the story and on the other characters. The action of the story is overtaken by the story of Anna and it is Anna’s choices and actions which becomes central for the next six or so chapters. In effect, it is her existential beginning which brings an end to the lives of her parents. Of course, Anna, in turn, enters into her own social death when Ursula’s story—the third tick-tock of the novel—becomes central for the last seven chapters.

We may question whether the fate of social death is not only limited to the main or dare we say “free” characters of the novel—those characters responsible for the movement of the story through their choices (kernels) and actions: social death is also applicable to “unfree,” minor characters, or those that Forster may describe as “flat” characters. These minor characters necessarily suffer social death but in an even more immediate sense because their story is not told in any significant detail and their lives are in many ways inessential to the main character’s story. Within the world of the novel, the minor character proper is socially dead and does not participate in creating
or choosing the world of the novel—their lives are more like satellites or fillers in the main character’s story. The minor character’s life lies elsewhere—an elsewhere that does not exist within the discursive framework of the novel. We may also say that they are of the same existential status as props or objects—beings-in-themselves. The minor character lives his or her (dead) life in the shadows of the living, free, “round” characters.

*Speculation, Corporeality, and Retrospective Patterning: Konstantin Levin and the Vincys*

We know from the example of *The Rainbow* that the socially dead couple of Tom and Lydia do “live on” because we are told so—the novel continues, and although they are no longer placed in the foreground of the story they still live and exist. However, at the end of the novel this “living-on” prospect must be thought of differently, particularly in terms of possibilities. Indeed, the above description of the relationship between endings, existence, and figurative death may seem to contradict the general assumption that the discursive end of a “living” character implies that the character has a future which is undetermined, such that the character should still be thought of as an ahistorical being; however, because of the corporeality of the novel it can be argued that the figurative, dead life of a character is very much determined because it is fixed—ossified—and cannot be altered. This is to say that, in theory, the novelist—the real person, poised with the pen or the finger over the keyboard of the PC—has nothing to add—not a single word more—to the story of his or her figuratively dead character’s life. Indeed, the characters remain “dead” until the pen or PC is again taken up by the novelist and the character’s story is continued, which with the exception of a few examples, such as the character of Stephen Dedalus appearing in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and again in *Ulysses*, or the figure of Marlow in

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42 Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, 91.
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several of Joseph Conrad’s novels, is a generally uncommon practice. As such, the character of the novel has little to no possibility of a discursive future such that the character enters into his or her figurative death and become an historical figuratively dead life which can be interpreted and evaluated by the shivering reader.

Of course there have been various attempts at endings which endeavour to overcome the sense of stasis of an ending—endings which seem to invite the reader to “speculate” on a character’s future rather than accept closure. However, the argument can be made that regardless of the invitation for speculation the character of the realist novel is still closed as the reader does not necessarily engage in the activity of speculation (even when invited); instead, the reader becomes engaged in the activity of retrospective analysis. As Torgovnick describes, this mode of retrospection can be attributed to the novel’s “geometry”:

Endings enable an informed definition of a work’s “geometry” and set into motion the process of retrospective rather than speculative thinking necessary to discern it—the process of “retrospective patterning.” Moreover, in completing the “circle” of a novel, endings create the illusion of life halted and poised for analysis. Like completed segments of human lives and as representations of them, completed stories illuminate and invite examination of human experiences. In part, we value endings because the retrospective patterning used to make sense of texts corresponds to one process used to make sense of life: the process of looking back over events and interpreting them in light of “how things turned out.” Ordinary readers and literary critics share an interest in endings because appreciating endings is one way of evaluating and organising personal experience.

Torgovnick intimates that the reader retrospectively examines the life of the fictional character, whether the character is biologically or figuratively dead. This retrospective patterning of the figurative dead life brings the character to a “determined” end and gives the character “wholeness.”
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This predisposition for the activity of retrospection rather than speculation of a figuratively dead character is exemplified by the end of the story of Levin in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. Following Anna’s suicide, the NOW-story shifts its focus to the story of Levin where the main action is his authentic revelation. Levin discovers the meaningfulness of his two projects—his life with Kitty and a life lived in God’s way. And it would seem that, like Jane Eyre and Emma, Levin’s life has entered figurative death: he has found meaning, and his future is static and historical. However, on the final page of the novel, in the very last paragraphs, this sense of stasis is somewhat undermined:

“This new feeling hasn’t changed me. . . .
“I’ll get angry in the same way with the coachman Ivan, argue in the same way, speak my mind inappropriately, there will be the same wall between my soul’s holy of holies and other people, even my wife, I’ll accuse her in the same way of my own fear and then regret it, I’ll fail in the same way to understand with my reason why I pray, and yet I will pray—but my life now, my whole life, regardless of all that may happen to me, every minute of it, is not only not meaningless, as it was before, but has the unquestionable meaning of the good which is in my power to put into it!”

Torgovnick argues that this ending is more open than it is closed, claiming that despite the purpose of the epilogue “it has no air of finality.” Torgovnick adds:

The meaning of life has changed for Levin, but life—especially domestic life—continues to unroll with all its banality and tedium. . . . At the end of *Anna Karenina*, family life exists separately from, and even in conflict with, the characters’ path of spiritual development.

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43 Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel*, 5.
44 Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 817.
45 Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel*, 72.
46 Ibid., 75.
Indeed, life does have the illusion of “unrolling” in all its banality and tedium, and separately from Levin’s spiritual development; however, this unrolling does not undermine the stasis of Levin’s understanding of the meaning of his life. It may be implied that time will continue; but the sense of historical meaning, from Levin’s figurative death, is maintained, and his figurative dead life is preserved, albeit as a banal, tedious, yet spiritually meaningful life. Further, the meaning of life has been revealed to him—an authoritative revelation which we have hitherto associated only with imminent death. Indeed, the light that Levin sees is symbolic of the light that the authoritative Ivan Ilyich and Anna Karenina see in dying. Levin understands the meaning of life and his life becomes complete and static, regardless of what the future may hold.

However, a more explicit example of a supposedly speculative ending can be found in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* in the last chapter entitled “Finale.” Despite the reader’s tacit understanding of what a “Finale” is and what it signifies, Eliot somewhat explicitly states the problem of the after-history and justifies its inclusion:

> Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.⁴⁷

The first after-history described is that of Fred and Mary Vincy who are the subject of the preceding chapter; and it is from this preceding chapter that the reader can logically assume that Fred and Mary will eventually get married and live a happy life, as is illustrated by the playful dialogue between the pair:

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“Oh, I could be a tremendously good fellow then, Mary, and we could be married directly.”

“Not so fast, sir; how do you know that I would not rather defer our marriage for some years? That would leave you time to misbehave, and then if I liked someone else better, I should have an excuse for jilting you.”

“Pray don’t joke, Mary,” said Fred, with strong feeling. “Tell me seriously that all this is true, and that you are happy because of it—because you love me best.”

“It is all true, Fred, and I am happy because of it—because I love you best,” said Mary, in a tone of obedient recitation. ⁴⁸

Despite the “tone” of Mary, the reader is easily lead to the assumption that the pair will wed in the near future. This assumption is affirmed after a brief description of the expectations of marriage:

Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness. It is still the beginning of the home epic—the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.

Some set out, like Crusaders of old, with a glorious equipment of hope and enthusiasm, and get broken by the way, wanting patience with each other and the world.

All who have cared for Fred Vincy and Mary Garth will like to know that these two made no such failure, but achieved a solid mutual happiness. ⁴⁹

The narrator seems to suggest that this ending is also a beginning—it is the ending of an epoch and the beginning of a new one. But, this suggestion relates to segments of life, segments which can be described as static. Indeed, Fred and Mary’s stasis is further evidenced if we consider that their traits at the end of the story of Middlemarch are very similar to those in the “Finale.” Although the narrator states that this is as

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⁴⁸ Ibid., 740.
⁴⁹ Ibid., 741.
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much a beginning as an ending, the discourse has ended and little to no detail need be supplemented and no speculation is necessary. Fred and Mary are complete and historical.

However, when discussing the reader's possible role of speculation we must also consider Roland Barthes' suggestion that the reader of the readerly text is merely a consumer of the text and is not “asked” to speculate on the text. The reader's task is not to speculate on the unwritten “discursive future” of the readerly text, which is also to say that the reader is not expected to write the writerly text. Barthes states, in somewhat negative terms, that realist literature is characterised by the “pitiless divorce . . . between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader,”

50 where the reader is idle and “left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a referendum.”

51 The reader’s task is to merely decide whether the story is valid, believable, and nothing more.

This claim is also discussed in somewhat more “positive” terms by Wolfgang Iser in *The Implied Reader*:

While the eighteenth-century novel reader was cast by the author in a specific role, so that he could be guided—directly, or indirectly, through affirmation or through negation—toward a conception of human nature and of reality, in the nineteenth century the reader was not told what part he was to play. Instead, he had to discover the fact that society had imposed a part on him, the object being for him eventually to take up a critical attitude toward this imposition. For him to perform this function, i.e., to accept the role of critic, it was essential that the novel refrain from explicitly telling him what to do, for criticism must at least appear to be spontaneous if it is to have any value for the critic himself. In order for this complex process to be put into operation, the author had to use a

51 Ibid.
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variety of cunning stratagems to nudge the reader unknowingly into making the “right”
discoveries.\textsuperscript{52}

The reader is given the illusion that they are discovering the text; in reality, however, the reader is merely consuming the text, and is being lead to an ending which is well established and void of contingency. The reader is merely “along for the predestined ride,” idly and patiently listening to the story of the storyteller. Indeed, the reader is the mute listener to the storyteller, like the anonymous narrator of Conrad’s \textit{Heart of Darkness}, listening to the story of Marlow, and only interrupts his story to describe Marlow’s demeanour as he recounts his tale. And, of course, the story of the novel also comes to an end at which point the reader is left to digest the story they have consumed; to understand the story, but not to question what comes next—what comes \textit{after} the conclusion.

Indeed, Kermode also argues that not only is the reader not free to speculate on the character’s future because the figuratively dead character is determined and whole, but the novelist is similarly bound by the determinacy of an end:

As soon as it speaks, begins to be a novel, it imposes causality and concordance, development, character, a past which matters and a future within certain broad limits determined by the project of the author rather than that of the characters. They have their choices, but the novel has its end.

It sounds good to say that the novelist is free; that, like the young man who asked Sartre whether he should join the Resistance or stay with his mother, he can be told “You are free, therefore choose; that is to say, invent.” We may even agree that until he has chosen he will not know the reasons for his choice. But there is in practice this difference between the novelist and the young man as Sartre sees him: the young man will always be free in just this degree; whether he stays with his mother or not, his decision will not be relevant to his next decision. But the novelist is not like that; he is more Thomist than Sartrean, and every choice will limit the next. He has to collaborate with his novel; he

\textsuperscript{52} Iser, \textit{The Implied Reader}, xiii–xiv.
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grows in bad faith. He is a world in which past, present, and future are related inextricably.\textsuperscript{53}

The novelist’s freedom is limited just as he or she limits their character’s freedom—the character’s past will and must dominate them—the character must end and the novelist must end the character. This end is related to the novel’s and the character’s beginnings—a claim which relates to the novel’s geometry and reaffirms the inherent retrospective patterning of the realist novel. The reader may speculate and extrapolate on the character’s story after his or her figurative death but it is an extrapolation on a determined individual, bound by historical, static traits and characteristics, which have been well established by the character’s past. This is of course one of the most significant disparities between fiction and reality: as Sartre claims, in reality the individual is always free to choose, irrespective of a past which no longer exists. However, the characters of the novel do not have this freedom—they are not free to choose in the sense that they are expected to be related to, and dominated by, their past.

*Figurative Death and the Illusion of Outliving One’s Meaningful Projects*

However, underneath the closure of figurative death lies a sense of inauthenticity of the novelist and also the reader who is directed by the novelist. The novelist’s attempt to bring meaningful closure to his or her characters through figurative death creates the appearance that the fictional character can escape the abject possibility of outliving his or her meaningful projects—of outliving their completed projects.\textsuperscript{54} To outlive one’s projects is to be left without purpose and desire which is possibly what Bernard Shaw means by his remark that “there are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart’s

\textsuperscript{53} Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 140–41.
\textsuperscript{54} Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 557.
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desire. The other is to gain it.\textsuperscript{55} The tragedy of the possibility of outliving one’s meaningful projects is described by Roquentin in Sartre’s \textit{Nausea} when he reveals the “meaninglessness” of the Autodidact’s meaningful project:

One day, seven years ago (he told me once that he has been studying for seven years) he came ceremoniously into this reading room. He looked round at the countless books lining the walls, and he must have said, rather like Rastignac: “It is between the two of us, Human Knowledge.” Then he went and took the first book from the first shelf on the far right; he opened it at the first page, with a feeling of respect and fear combined with unshakeable determination. Today he has reached “L.” “K” after “J,” “L” after “K.” He has passed abruptly from the study of coleopterae to that of quantum theory, from a work on Tamerlane to a Catholic pamphlet against Darwinism: not for a moment has he been put off his stride. He has read everything; he has stored away in his head half of what is known about parthenogenesis, half the arguments against vivisection. Behind him, before him, there is a universe. And the day approaches when, closing the last book on the last shelf on the far left, he will say to himself: “And now what?”\textsuperscript{56}

Roquentin leaves this question hanging, unanswered, and innocuously adds: “It is time for [the Autodidact’s] afternoon snack.”\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, Roquentin, a historian, faces a similar situation: Roquentin’s project in \textit{Nausea} is the writing of the biography of Monsieur de Rollebon—a project with which he has been engaged with for some time; but his writing becomes stifled and eventually he stops with an admission: “The great Rollebon affair has come to an end, like a great passion. I shall have to find something else.”\textsuperscript{58}

What follows is Roquentin’s anxious coming to terms with his existence:

\textsuperscript{55} Shaw, \textit{Man and Superman}, act iv.
\textsuperscript{56} Sartre, \textit{Nausea}, 49.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 142.
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That is half past five striking. I get up, my cold shirt is sticking to my flesh. I go out. Why? Why?

Well, because I have no reason for not going out either. Even if I stay, even if I curl up quietly in a corner, I shan’t forget myself. I shall be there, I shall weigh on the floor. I am.59

The question for each of us is: What happens next when a meaningful project is completed, and yet we continue to exist? Does our existence that follows the completion of our meaningful projects have meaning? Does it add meaning, or does it remove meaning, which is to say, does the existence that follows our projects completion alter the meaning we have intended by the completion of our meaningful projects? This is a significant problem faced by the realist novelist when he or she creates the meaningful story of their fictional characters. The novelist must create a whole piece of art work—it must be complete. And it is because of this that the argument can be made that the realist novelist avoids Roquentin’s question “and now what?” by way of the technique of coinciding the end of the discourse of the novel with the end of the fictional character’s meaningful project. This is because what comes after the novel’s discursive end can only detract from not only the aesthetic wholeness of the novel, but also the meaningfulness of the project, and the completeness of the fictional character. The wholeness of the novel is both expected and desired by the realist reader. The novelist aims to have his characters’ lives end with a “bang and not a whimper.” The character’s life lasts in the reader’s mind in a seemingly contradictory fashion: the character’s life appears open to a number of likely possibilities, whilst the character’s life has the appearance of remaining static and untainted by what an unknown future may hold—a future which may undo the meaning so painstakingly created by the novelist.

But the closure of figurative death also avoids another form of “abjectness”: the ever-present possibility of “outliving” life itself by becoming socially dead. Again we can consider the “outlived life” of Addie in Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying, described above. Addie’s biological death is preceded with her social death: a death which is...
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represented as a meaningless, morbid, and objectionable finale to a life. It is this ending which is wholly disparate from the more “romantic” endings of a realist, figurative death, such as those of Jane Eyre and Emma. Addie’s social death is precisely the death that the realist novelists’ avoided insofar as an abject after-history of social death could only detract from the reader’s interpretation of the “elevated” hero’s meaning.

This escape of the character from outliving his or her projects and social death is also the escape of the reader into a form of inauthenticity—an escape from his or her own undesirable possibilities of outliving their own projects or of outliving life. The figurative death reflects a romantic assumption that the meaningfulness that comes from figurative death is also true of real, actual death thereby creating the reader’s inauthentic belief that the questions “And now what?” or “What happens next?” are redundant questions.

The Absurd Character of Anti-Closure: Holden Caulfield and Stephan Dedalus

This description of figurative death has focused solely on realist novels which, despite effecting the illusion that a character’s life “continues on” beyond the end of the discourse, are very much closed narratives. However, the question we must now ask is: How do we interpret the endings of characters in novels that are considered “anti-closural”?

These types of endings are commonly found in modernist and postmodernist fiction, where the lives of the characters have a more convincing “appearance” of being “open-ended” and undetermined, or are absurd. The significance of anti-closural novels and the interpretation of the meaning of their open-ended characters is that their relationship represents the flipside of the complete meaningfulness that a figurative death gives a realist novel’s closed character: instead of the realist novel’s interpretability of “complete meaningfulness,” there is only the

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60 See Torgovnick, Closure in the Novel, 6.
absurdity of interpreting incomplete, open-ended characters. They are absurd because of the futile activity of speculating on the lives of open-ended characters—an activity somewhat “superficially” encouraged in the closed realist novel but “overtly” encouraged in the anti-closural novel. The absurdity of the open-ended character and the absurdity of speculating on the future of the open-ended character can best be understood if we examine their similarities to Sartre’s claims relating to the “absurdity of premature death.” Sartre begins his discussion on the absurdity of premature death by stating that “my death”—my own individual death, that no-one can do for me—“can not be foreseen for any date. . . . (I can die at the age of a hundred or at thirty-seven, tomorrow).”⁶¹ Therefore, although death can be expected, it cannot be waited for in days, weeks, or years. For Sartre, this is one of the unique qualities of death: it is a “surprise” as death is the “always possible nihilation of my possibles, a nihilation outside my possibilities. It is . . . the project which destroys all projects and which destroys itself.”⁶² Death can always come before the end,⁶³ where the “end” does not simply mean the end of our lives—the temporal and biological boundary of our lives—but the completion of our meaningful project. As Sartre states, the harmony between death and meaning is rarely, if ever, like that of a resolved chord—it can “cut short” our meaningful projects and render the project incomplete such that our projects necessarily succumb to absurdity as they are directed toward an unattainable goal.

Sartre uses a fictional example to illustrate his claims:

[A] young man has lived for thirty years in the expectation of becoming a great writer, but this waiting itself is not enough; it becomes a vain and senseless obstinacy or a profound comprehension of his value according to the books which he writes. His first book has appeared, but by itself what does it mean? It is the book of a beginner. Let us admit that it is good; still it gets its meaning through the future. If it is unique, it is at once inauguration and testament. He had only one book to write; he is limited and cut off by his work; he will not be “a great writer.” If the novel is one in a mediocre series, it is an “accident.” If it is

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⁶¹ Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 556–57.
⁶² Ibid., 561.
followed by other better books, it can classify its author in the first rank. But exactly at this point death strikes the author—at the very moment when he was anxiously testing himself to find out “whether he had the stuff” to write another work, at the moment when he was still expecting to become a great writer. This is enough to cause everything to fall into the undetermined: I can not say that the dead writer is the author of a single book (in the sense that he would have had only one book to write) nor that he would have written several (since in fact only one has appeared). I can say nothing. Suppose that Balzac had died before Les Chouans; he would remain the author of some execrable novels of intrigue. But suddenly the very expectation which this young man was, this expectation of being a great man, loses any kind of meaning; it is neither an obstinate and egotistical blindness nor the true sense of his own value since nothing shall ever decide it. It would be useless indeed to try to decide it by considering the sacrifices which he made to his art, the obscure and hard life which he was willing to lead; just as many mediocre figures have had the strength to make comparable sacrifices. On the contrary, the final value of this conduct remains forever in suspense; or if you prefer, the ensemble (particular kinds of conduct, expectations, values) falls suddenly into the absurd. Thus death is never that which gives life its meanings; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle removes all meaning from life. If we must die, then our life has no meaning because its problems receive no solution and because the very meaning of the problems remains undetermined.

The premature death of the writer throws his life into an indeterminable state. Instead of stasis, the writer’s projected life prompts only questions and speculations; speculations which are in themselves absurd because of the inability to grasp the many contingencies that control one’s future possibilities. And like the absurdity of premature death, open-ended fictional characters prompt only questions that relate to their undislosed future. The open-ended character’s life, like the writer’s, is not closed and therefore does not lend itself to interpretability. But it is also the connection of the corporeality of existence which further binds these two examples: the dead writer—a

63 Ibid., 557.
64 Ibid., 560.
real existent—has ceased to exist, leaving a void of nothingness, such that it becomes uninterpretable; similarly the character of the novel ceases to exist beyond the corporeal boundary of the book, and similarly projects into a void of nothingness thereby becoming uninterpretable. This void of nothingness differs from the nothingness that lies outside of the realist novel simply because the realist novel does not project into this void with any conviction or purpose, whereas the anti-closural novel readily projects itself into the void. This is why the character of the anti-closural novel may be considered absurd and uninterpretable. More importantly, it can be said that these characters are of little value to the shivering reader, especially the reader of modern or postmodern fiction, as no answers to the reader’s questions are found within the text. There is no closure and no synthesis of intention and revelation which are necessary for the accuracy and equanimity of interpretation and evaluation.

The sense of the absurdity of the open-ended character is exemplified by the closing paragraphs of the first-person narration of Holden Caulfield, in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1945–46):

That’s all I’m going to tell about. I could probably tell you what I did after I went home, and how I got sick and all, and what school I’m supposed to go to next fall, after I get out of here, but I don’t feel like it. I really don’t. That stuff doesn’t interest me too much right now.

A lot of people, especially this one psychoanalyst guy they have here, keeps asking me if I’m going to apply myself when I go back to school next September. It’s such a stupid question, in my opinion. I mean how do you know what you’re going to do till you do it? The answer is, you don’t. I *think* I am, but how do I know? I swear it’s a stupid question.65

Holden tells the reader of a question he has been asked by his psychoanalyst: What is he going to do in the future? Ironically, this is a question that the reader could also ask of Holden. And Holden answers the question accordingly: he doesn’t know—there are
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only possibilities spread out before him. And because it is a fictional story and because Holden’s existence as raw story material ends on this final page, it would be absurd to speculate on his future possibilities. The reader cannot ask questions of what may become of Holden’s life because nothing could come. This claim is further emphasised by Holden’s lack of projection: it is not that there are too many possibilities from which the reader must choose (as even the binary of success or failure presents the reader with an absurdity), but because of Holden’s lack of projection into the future. He does not know what the future may hold and he has no goal that the reader could begin to speculate on. The meaning of Holden’s life is based purely on absurd speculation of the unknown.

The indeterminacy of the open-ended character is also exemplified by the character of Stephen Dedalus from James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man—an example of the late Bildungsroman.66 A Portrait begins with Stephen’s earliest memories as a child with his father reading him a bedtime story. However the NOW-story primarily focuses on his upbringing at an Irish catholic school. At the age of sixteen, his fear of God prompts Stephen to repent a sinful past—his childhood indiscretions. He confesses his sins and begins a pious life—a life of martyrdom and sacrifice. His piety leads to his being asked to join the order of the church; however, he quickly realises, upon seeing the “grave and ordered and passionless life”67 of the priesthood, that it is not his calling. He proceeds to have what can be described as an existential beginning:

His throat ached with a desire to cry aloud, the cry of a hawk or eagle on high, to cry piercingly of his deliverance to the winds. This was the call of life to his soul not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair, not the inhuman voice that had called him to the pale service of the altar. An instant of wild flight had delivered him and the cry of triumph which his lips withheld cleft his brain.

67 Joyce, A Portrait, 160.
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—Stephanoforos!

What were they now but cerements shaken from the body of death—the fear he had walked in night and day, the incertitude that had ringed him round, the shame that had abased him within and without—cerements, the linens of the grave?

His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her grave-clothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.  

Stephen’s existential beginning signifies a new direction, a new possibility, which is a choice he has made for himself. Stephen chooses the meaningful project of “artist”—he writes poetry and, indeed, he is several times referred to as a poet. However, what becomes of this choice is not brought to a definitive conclusion. This indeterminism is illustrated by the final page of the novel, which comprises Stephen’s last two diary entries:

April 26. Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

April 27. Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.  

The novel ends with Stephen’s journey into a life outside of the novel’s pages, a journey which marks the possibility of shaping Stephen’s project of becoming an artist and show whether Stephen continues on this chosen path or whether he “begins” again. And his “success” as an artist is also called into question as the evidence of his potential is mixed and speculative insofar as the character of Stephen is partly identifiable with Joyce himself (who many would argue is not a “mediocre” writer), but

Ibid., 169–70.
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also because of the many similarities and differences between the Stephen of *A Portrait* and the Stephen of Joyce’s earlier work *Stephen Hero* which he revised to form *A Portrait*. However, one can nevertheless speculate on Stephen’s future. One such speculation is from William York Tindall who argues that within the text of *A Portrait* there is evidence that Stephen will not be a success:

Aside from his weekly essay at school and the verses composed in bed with creator’s ardour to an accompaniment more seraphic than the occasion warrants, Stephen’s forgery is less practical than theoretic: “he was striving to forge out an esthetic philosophy.” From the evidence before us and whatever the title, Stephen is less artist than aesthetic philosopher—aesthete, in short, or man of letters. His interests, not only personal, are literary. Even in infancy he is fascinated by words (“belt” and “suck,” for example); and his adolescence is detained by the words “detain” and “tundish.” Fascinated by rhythm, he esteems it whether in the supple periods of Newman or in nonsense verses of his own composition. However internal his concerns and whatever the weakness of his eyes, each of his five senses is keen, a cause of trouble or delight. These are hopeful signs. The extent of his reading, displayed by quotation and allusion, is also impressive. If no artist yet, Stephen has some of the equipment. Potential or future artist perhaps, he has some of the matter from which an artist could be forged, in whatever sense we take this pleasing and useful ambiguity. But, plainly, something is lacking there.

Since this “artist” fails to become an artist or a complete forger, his portrait is not a story of success.

Tindall argues that Stephen has the potential of becoming an artist; however, from Stephen’s past choices and actions, which are described within the novel, this future possibility will not be successful—Stephen will not become an artist or at least not a successful artist. This argument is somewhat evidenced if we consider that Joyce’s

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69 Ibid., 253.
70 Riquelme, “*Stephen Hero, Dubliners, and A Portrait*,” 104.
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intention for Stephen was not to be a particularly, unique individual but as an “accumulation of identities. . . . For Joyce no individual is so unusual and no situation so distinct as not to echo other individuals and situations. Stephan Dedalus goes out to encounter reality for the millionth time.” Stephen was not meant to be portrayed as an outstanding individual, or as an outstanding artist, or as having “supernatural power.” And, yet, even if this intention of Joyce’s does in some way support Tindall’s claims, it does not negate the mistake made by Tindall (a mistake that we each inevitably make in most aspects of our lives) of predicting Stephen’s future by looking to his past—a prediction that Sartre claims we cannot make. Indeed, the uncanny similarities between the young writer of which Sartre speaks and the character of Stephen Dedalus reaffirms the absurdity of predicting Stephen’s future: in Tindall’s opinion, Stephen’s senses are keen and the extent of Stephen’s reading is impressive and an artist could be forged from this matter; similarly, the writer’s first book is good but it is that of a beginner. However, where Sartre proclaims absurdity, insofar as we cannot merely guess whether this mediocre book is representative of those books that could follow or is merely a stepping-stone to a higher level of capability, Tindall proceeds to speculate and ossify Stephen’s future.

Anti-Closure and Intertextuality: Clarissa Dalloway and Antoinette Cosway

Of course any attempt at the interpretation, evaluation and speculation of a character such as Stephen Dedalus is plagued with difficulty. This is because Stephen is not so open-ended and indeterminable in the way that Holden Caulfield appears to be. This is because the “open-ended” Stephen is “resurrected” by Joyce in Ulysses, albeit unceremoniously, with Buck Mulligan’s exclamation (having borrowed Stephan’s handkerchief): “The bard’s noserag. A new art colour for our Irish poets: snotgreen.”

72 Ellmann, James Joyce, 550.
73 Ibid.
Although the beginning of the story of *Ulysses* is set only a few months after the end of *A Portrait* the significance of the appellation of “bard” is that Stephen is (in very general terms) still choosing the same project of becoming an artist. More importantly, the example of the open-ended character of Stephen illustrates how a character can be “added to” given a future where they once only had a past.

However, a character can be added to in two other ways. The first is where the future of an open-ended character is indirectly (yet purposefully) alluded to, either from within the text or from outside the text, thereby playing a major part in limiting the speculation of the open-ended character’s future. This technique is exemplified by the character of Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* in which there is an allusion to Clarissa committing suicide “outside” of the story of *Mrs. Dalloway*. This allusion is made explicitly by Woolf in her introduction to the Modern Library Edition of *Mrs. Dalloway* where she states that she intended for Septimus Warren Smith, the shell-shocked World War One soldier who takes his own life, to be the double of Clarissa.\(^7\) Clarissa’s possible suicide has a sense of imminence such that speculation of her death is somewhat justified, as is the claim that, because of the nearness of her death, Clarissa can be seen as somewhat of a complete, figuratively dead character and can be interpreted and evaluated by the reader as such. What was an open-ended character—open to speculation by the end of the text—is now a closed, whole and meaningful character, an implication made within the text itself. However, Clarissa’s possible suicide is somewhat defused from outside *Mrs. Dalloway* in Michael Cunningham’s intertextual novel *The Hours* (1998). Cunningham represents three stories of three women all of which somehow relate to the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*. The first character is Woolf herself. She is introduced in the “Prologue,” the main action of which is Woolf’s suicide, when she drowns herself near the family home in 1941. The story of Woolf then has a flashback to London in 1923, and become the main story. The second character is Clarissa Vaughan, a woman whose life mirrors the life of the character Mrs. Dalloway. The time and setting is the end of the twentieth century in
New York City. Like Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa is hosting a party that night and the
duration of the story-time is less than a day. There is also a connection between
Clarissa's friend Richard (whom the party is for) and Septimus as Richard also takes
his own life by jumping out of a window only a few hours before the party is to begin.
The third woman, Mrs. Brown, is reading *Mrs. Dalloway*. The time and setting is 1949
in Los Angeles and the duration of her story is also less than one day. Mrs. Brown is a
depressed woman, unable to understand how to be a mother to her son Richie and a
wife to her husband Dan. She seeks immersion in a different reality—the reality of
fiction—and she also contemplates taking her own life. Each of the three characters
mirrors each other, and each is haunted by the act of suicide. Yet only Woolf actually
takes her life *within* the story of the novel; the other two characters, however, do not.
And, it would *appear* that they will not take their own lives in the near future, as is
indicated in the story of Woolf who, when writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, explicitly states that
Clarissa Dalloway "will not die." This essentially "factual" statement may seem to be a
contradiction to Woolf's claim that the suicidal Septimus is the double of Mrs. Dalloway.
However, in *The Hours*, Woolf, it can be argued, does not say that Clarissa will *never*
die or will not die soon or will *never* commit suicide, only that she will not die or die
soon or commit suicide *within* the pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Indeed, Mrs. Brown, who
does not take her own life within the story, could similarly commit suicide in the near
future. This possibility is further strengthened when we discover that Mrs. Brown is
Richard's mother. Richard's suicide could easily be the catalyst for the haunting
possibility of her suicide. Indeed, the stories of both Clarissa Vaughn and Mrs. Brown
end at a very similar stage in life and both are affected by Richard's suicide. Again the
reader is faced with the question of what will become of Clarissa Vaughn and Mrs.
Brown. And again it would seem that suicide is a definite and imminent possibility for
each of the characters as each of the characters mirror the others in some way:
Septimus and Clarissa Dalloway; Clarissa Dalloway and Clarissa Vaughn; and Woolf

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75 See David Bradshaw's introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf, xxi.
76 M. Cunningham, *The Hours*, 211.
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and Mrs. Brown, both of whom suffer from bouts of depression and have an obsession with death. Mrs Dalloway is a very special case of a fiction where the reader's projection of the character's possibilities is viable. However, this is not the case of “absurdist” postmodern fictions where there are little to no clues to the possibilities which may lie “outside” the discourse. Again we can consider the story of Oedipa Maas in Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 to illustrate this. As has been described, the plot of The Crying of Lot 49 is founded on suspended meaning; it is a beginning which disintegrates into indeterminacy, or as Thwaites writes, it is a beginning which “is not resolved, but repeated, and even complicated in this repetition.” Here, words such as “ends,” “revelations,” and “answers” lose their poignancy. It should be noted that The Crying of Lot 49, like Mrs Dalloway and Anna Karenina has a discursive end—it has a final page with a full stop at the end of the final sentence; but, where Anna Karenina closes itself, and Mrs Dalloway, invites closure, The Crying of Lot 49 reveals the futility of projection. This is to say that to project beyond the text is to project an absurdity. Indeed, where Woolf seemingly invites the reader to draw conclusions and infer possibilities, the reader of Pynchon’s novel is reluctant to engage in such an activity, which is precisely the aim of the absurdist novelist: to uncover the futility of our serious endeavours to make meaning of our projects through their future ends—the futility of our attempts to understand our individual deaths and how they relate to the ends within a quiet, godless universe. The consequence of course is that the shivering reader is not warmed by closure; if anything, his or her anxiety is prolonged and intensified.

The second way in which a fictional character can be added to is when the life of a biologically dead, “closed” character is “reopened” and added to such that the character becomes more rounded—more rounded by adding detail to the character’s past. This form of “resurrection” is exemplified in Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea

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77 Of course, what must also be acknowledged is that, unlike the relatively young characters of Holden Caulfield and Stephen Dedalus, Clarissa Dalloway is much older, and it can be said that the wholeness and shape of her life has become much more determined, despite the lack of discourse devoted to her past. Clarissa’s future choices, intimated by the openness of her character, would have little bearing on the interpretation and evaluation of the whole of her life, such that, once again, she is essentially a closed and interpretable character.

78 Thwaites, “Miracles,” 270.
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(1966). Rhys reworks the character of Antoinette Cosway/Bertha Mason from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and in doing so gives the flat character of Bertha—hitherto known only as the mad woman locked away in the “attic” of Thornfield—a fuller history and distances her from Jane Eyre’s description of Bertha as a “clothed hyena” with “purple face” and “bloated features.”

Indeed, from Jane Eyre’s description it would seem that Bertha is unrecognisable as a human being, let alone as an individual with a meaningful life and meaningful projects. She is without voice except for her animalistic growling, her fierce cries and maniacal bellowing. Her purpose is that of a plot function, and is of little to no value to the shivering reader. However, in Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the events of Antoinette’s life—prior to those described in *Jane Eyre*—are recounted from Antoinette’s first-person point of view. Rhys gives Antoinette a voice and gives her purpose: she chooses and acts and she has a personal narrative with meaningful projects. And Antoinette is given roundness—she is no longer marginalised, but becomes the centre of the story. It is around her life that the meaningful story takes place. What is also interesting is that Bertha dies within the discourse of *Jane Eyre* which would theoretically make her complete and interpretable; and yet she is far from being a round character and cannot be interpreted with any accuracy. However, when the two texts are “conflated,” Antoinette/Bertha becomes a properly round and interpretable character. And for the shivering reader, Antoinette’s/Bertha’s life becomes “valuable.”

**Vicarious Endings, Closure, and the Inauthentic Reader**

I have suggested that open-ended characters are of lesser value to the shivering reader than both figuratively and biologically dead characters, because they represent

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80 Ibid.
81 The example of Antoinette/Bertha also prompts questions relating to the ownership of a character’s life and the rights over the meaning of a character’s life: Does the life and the
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the absurdity of incompleteness. Indeed, they may be seen as less valuable as they reflect the reader’s own lack of wholeness and completion. It is this lack of wholeness and completion which brings us to one final way in which the novel, particularly the realist novel, can warm the shivering reader: the closed realist novel can warm the shivering reader *vicariously* as the reader can experience that which cannot be experienced in his or her own life, namely death and the closure of death. Indeed, throughout this thesis, it has been argued that the shivering reader cannot experience death until he or she is dying; therefore, shivering the reader looks to others—other people—but also fictional characters to experience the unknowable experience of death. However, the shivering reader also desires meaning and closure in an absurd, infinite world which will continue to exist with or without his or her individual life. The shivering reader cannot experience death and thus cannot experience wholeness and closure nor meaning within an infinite world. As Heidegger describes:

> As long as Dasein *is* as an entity, it has never reached its “wholeness.” But if it gains such “wholeness,” this gain becomes the utter loss of Being-in-the-world. In such a case, it can never again be experienced *as an entity.*

The shivering reader desires an ending which confers completion, closure, and wholeness. The novel satisfies this desire as it escapes the absurdity that haunts the reality of human existence: the world of the realist novel does end—it is a finite world, with a beginning and an end—and the novel’s characters’ existence within this fictional world also ends. The characters’ lives and the closed discourse of the novel are inextricably linked: one perpetuates the existence of the other. And the characters’ existence ends regardless of whether they are biologically dead or figuratively dead—they are closed and whole and they have meaning within their fragmented fictional

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meaning of a character’s life belongs to the character’s creator or is the character an open-ended “text,” vulnerable to appropriation, reinterpretation, and re-evaluation?  

82 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 236H.
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worlds. This is why the shivering reader looks to the novel for vicarious warmth. As Torgovnick states:

Individuals interrupt the flow of their own lives for immersion in the life of fiction to achieve the satisfaction of an ending. Our sense that fictions will end in part nurtures our desire to read them.83

The authentic shivering reader immerses him or herself in the inauthentic mode of vicarious satisfaction—the inauthentic warmth of vicarious wholeness and meaning. Where earlier it was suggested that the shivering reader is warmed by the novel’s representation of the fictional character’s dying revelations—warmth derived from his or her dying wisdom—now the shivering reader desires the warmth of ignorance and inauthenticity, as he or she immerses themselves in the pages of the finite novel.

83 Torgovnick, Closure in the Novel, 4.
We began this thesis with two questions, one far more serious than the other: the first was the question, why does the novel reader read; the second, the question of the meaning of life. And we saw how both these questions were very much related: the reader reads to understand better the meaning of his or her life. More specifically, in the modern world, the novel reader is, as Benjamin claims, a shivering reader—an existentially anxious reader—having been thrown into the world without instruction or guidance. As has been argued, this is very much the case for the contemporary reader, where the secularisation and privatisation of death continues to be of cause for anxiety. Indeed, in a world of human and species finitude—a world of ecological crises and extinction prophesises—anxiety about meaning and purpose is not only justifiable but maintains its critical and theoretical poignancy. The shivering reader is faced with the perplexity of the abyss of unknown meaning; and because of this perplexity, the reader looks to the novel and its characters to warm his or her life—warm themselves with wisdom and insights into the creation and revelation of individual meaning. A reader finds this warmth primarily in the realist novel, especially in novels such as *Anna Karenina*, *Nostromo*, *The Tree of Man*, and *Jane Eyre*. Indeed, the realist novel shows itself to be the most valuable form because its attributes and conventions provide the warmth sought by the reader. These attributes and conventions relate to the structure of the narrative which, being linear, has an identifiable beginning, middle, and end. Further, characters choose meaningful projects—projects which create the meaningful structure of the story. These stories begin with the characters’ primary or secondary meaningful choices and come to an end with their actual or figurative death. It is only in the end that the meanings of the characters’ choices are revealed; it gives the characters a sense of wholeness, but also gives the reader a sense of closure. The realist novel is also valuable because readers can readily identify with its characters.
and can immerse themselves in the characters’ stories. These valuable attributes and conventions of the realist novel are further emphasised when contrasted with novels that intentionally or unintentionally defy such conventions, particularly those novels which fall into the category of the postmodern novel. We have considered examples such as Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Each of these novels purposefully undermines the shivering reader’s sense of an ending, and his or her vicarious closure. The shivering reader’s need for the meaningfulness of *tick-tock* so as to make sense of his or her own life is frustrated by the *tick-tock-tick* of the modern novel or the *tock-tick* or *tick-…* of the postmodern novel. Moreover, metafictional novels such as *Tristram Shandy* and *Midnight’s Children* continually remind the reader that he or she is reading fiction, denying the “reality” of the texts and thereby undermining their value to the shivering reader.

However, in the postmodern world—the world of printed text as well as hypertext (electronic text) and electronic books (e-books)—it is not only the content of the postmodern novel which can undermine its value to the shivering reader, but the presented discourse, or the form of representation, itself. Indeed, in the world of the computer and virtual images, the “corporeal” book appears obsolete:

So long as the text was married to a physical media, readers and writers took for granted three crucial attributes: that the text was *linear, bounded,* and *fixed*. Generations of scholars and authors internalised these qualities as the rules of thought, and they had pervasive social consequences. We can define *Hypertext* as the use of the computer to transcend the linear, bounded, and fixed qualities of the traditional written text. . . . Instead of facing a stable object—the book—enclosing an entire text and held between two hands, the hypertext reader sees only the image of a single block of text on the computer screen. Behind that image lies a variable textual structure that can be
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represented on the screen in different ways, according to the reader’s choice of links to follow.¹

A pertinent example of a novel which would benefit the reader if recast as hypertext is Joyce’s *Ulysses* — a novel in which an editor’s explanatory endnotes often supplement the main text. Instead of the reader physically flipping through the pages to see these endnotes, a hypertext version would enable this information to be more readily accessible — a hyperlink would retrieve this information immediately without losing one’s page. Take, for example, the many Dublin slang terms, such as *scutter* and *bowsy;²* which riddle *Ulysses:* instead of the reader having to search for the meaning of the words at the back of the book, disrupting the reading process, the meanings can be accessed immediately. Further, a hypertext version of *Ulysses* could also be interspersed with hyperlinks to supplementary information “outside” or “behind” the novel’s text, such as various introductions to the text, histories and maps of Dublin, but also to other works, including Homer’s *Odyssey,* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* — both of which have a significant connection to *Ulysses.* The same benefits of hypertextual representation could assist the reading of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49.* Indeed, on the first page alone of Pynchon’s chaotic novel, hyperlinks could connect the reader to a history of the Tupperware brand, maps of both Mazatlán and Cornell University, a rendition of Bartók’s Concerto for Orchestra, and an auto/biography of Jay Gould.³

However, for the shivering reader there is an unwanted side-effect to this wealth of supplementary information, namely that these connecting hyperlinks may also lead to further hyperlinks, such that the discourse of the novel, and the meaning of the novel, is ever-expanding and cannot be closed; and as such meaning cannot be localised, a centre found or pinned down. Indeed, Tristram Shandy’s and *Midnight’s Children’s* Saleem Sinai’s stories affirm the difficulty of grasping a whole text as they are essentially “hypertextual” representations; what is more they reflect the

¹ Delany and Landow, eds., *Hypermedia and Literary Studies,* 3.
² In Dublin slang, *scutter* is a dismissive term and means a watery stool; whereas *bowsy* is Dublin slang for a worthless fellow. See Declan Kiberd’s notes to *Ulysses,* by Joyce.
possibilities of the new, virtual medium of the computer age. Within the world of the hypertextual novel there is an *absence* of definitive meaning, reflecting postmodern culture’s resistance to such definitive meaning. As a book or as hypertextual representation, these postmodern fictions lack the warmth sought by the shivering reader. Indeed, the solution to the problem of textual limitation by enabling access to more information—more than can be written—only exacerbates the problem for the shivering reader.

Of course, realist novels can also be “hypertextualised”—represented as e-books—where hyperlinks may guide the reader to further information about the author and the novel’s historical context; however, for the benefit of the shivering reader, this supplementary information does not necessarily compromise the “closedness” of the realist novel’s characters because the realist novel is essentially a self-sufficient “system”. The novel begins and ends within the novel’s pages, such that the novel and its characters remain complete and whole. The medium by which the realist novel is represented does not compromise its closed meaningful narrative. There is, however, a drawback to the hypertextual version of the realist novel, namely its lack of corporeal boundaries—boundaries which reflect the closed structure of the realist narrative but are also important for the reader’s interpretation and evaluation of the realist novel’s characters. When reading a book, the reader can *see* a character’s past and a character’s future as pages existing in space and time. The reader can physically see, at a glance, the whole, complete world of the realist novel and the whole meaningful life of the character within this world.

Thus, we can say that it is not only the closed, interpretable world of the realist novel that best warms the shivering reader, and is of value to the shivering reader, it is also the closed, corporeality of the print medium—the book—which symbolises the closed, interpretable world of the realist novel. The shivering reader looks to the realist representation of the fictional Other, printed on the pages of the book before them, because it lends itself to closedness and interpretability. And from this closed

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3 All of which have a reference in the free online encyclopaedia Wikipedia.
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interpretation, the reader gains some form of wisdom and insight into both the creation and revelation of meaning, and some understanding of the true meaning of his or her own life before the revelation of meaning in death. By looking to fictional characters such as Levin, Anna Karenina, Ivan Ilyich, Nostromo and Jane Eyre, the reader can better understand what it is that makes life meaningful and what death reveals of that meaning; the reader can see how these characters achieve their desired outcomes of their meaningful choices by looking to the representation of what is essentially their whole lives. But the reader can also gather some understanding of what it means to have a whole meaningful life—an understanding that the living reader can only know of vicariously, as only in death does the reader gain wholeness. The warmth of fiction for the shivering reader is therefore both the warmth of knowledge and warmth of vicarious endings, both of which are derived from the dead lives of the realist novel’s characters.

In closing, it must be noted that this desire is not particular to the Victorian reader or the pre-postmodern, twentieth century reader. It a desire also for contemporary (postmodern) readers—a desire which is being met by contemporary realism. As Julie Scanlon writes in “Why do we still want to believe? The Case of Annie Proulx”:

Contemporary realism stands as an uncanny shadowing of the supposedly more avant-garde forms that developed correlative to such shifts. Its very persistence intimates reality is biting back in other ways, an undercurrent to the mainstay of contemporary critical perceptions, an undercurrent that exhibits desire for the possibility of a reality and the potential for its representation.  

The contemporary reader still wants to believe, or chooses to believe, in fictional worlds even if the reader knows these worlds are fictional. Further, the contemporary reader chooses to believe in fictional worlds even if the fictionality of these worlds is clearly acknowledged by their contemporary authors. Scanlon cites Annie Proulx as an

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4 Scanlon, “Why do we still want to believe? The Case of Annie Proulx,” 89.
example of an author who acknowledges the fictionality of a work and yet desires realism as she “consciously presents herself as a storyteller who bases her fictions on facts.”\(^5\) And it is in Proulx’s *The Shipping News* that we see this desire in practice as she employs classical realist techniques such as faith in mimesis, and the placing of the story in a real location: Newfoundland. But the desire for realism is also found in Proulx’s novel’s reception as *The Shipping News* was “critiqued for providing an inaccurate picture of Newfoundland.”\(^6\) What is implied by this comment is that both the reader and writer desire realism—the fictional representation of reality. But, as has been argued in this thesis, it is not only a reaction against postmodern theory which has sparked the desire for fictional realism: it is also the ever-present desire of the shivering reader. Indeed, the shivering reader has not disappeared—the questions of the meaning of life have not been answered. The shivering reader is, today, still looking to others—real people—for answers to the questions of meaning; and if the reader cannot find these answers in the real Other, then he or she can look to the fictional Other. Clearly this need has a unique connection to the reader’s desire for realism: the reader is looking to realistic representations of the lives and deaths of characters within the realist novel’s closed revelatory structure. Indeed, in a quiet, godless world, where no instruction is given, it is these closed, realist characters, found in past and contemporary fiction, that best warm the shivering reader with the wisdom and insight to choose and create a meaningful life.

\(^5\) Ibid., 90.
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6 Ibid.
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