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More on narrative closure

Abstract: In this article, we shall contribute to the theory of narrative closure. In pre-theoretical terms, a narrative features closure if it has an ending. We start by giving a general introduction into the closure phenomenon. Next, we offer a reconstruction of Noël Carroll's (2007. Narrative closure. *Philosophical Studies 135*. 1–15) eretetic account of narrative closure, according to which a narrative exhibits closure (roughly) if readers have a "feeling of finality" which in turn is based on the judgment that the presiding macro questions posed by the plot of the narrative get answered. We then discuss a number of questions raised by Carroll's account, namely whether a definition of "narrative closure" based on his account is either too inclusive or too exclusive; whether narrative closure is a property of narratives or of plots; whether narrative closure comes in grades; whether "narrative closure" is a restrictive notion; and whether "narrative closure" should be ascribed online (incrementally) or on the basis of all-things-considered *ex post* interpretations. Our answers to these questions are couched in terms of refined definitions, for this allows us to keep track of the progress and facilitates comparisons between the different proposals developed. Finally, we offer a definition of "narrative closure" that summarizes our amendments to Carroll's theory.

Keywords: narrative closure, plot, Carroll, eretetic, finality

1 Introduction

Some narratives have an ending, others don't. Talk of "ending" here of course does not merely mean that the narrative somewhere stops. All narratives are the results of acts of storytelling, and as such they must stop at some point. However, a narrator may stop narrating although her story is not over, or the story may be over but the narrator, for whatever reason, decides to go on. Consider the opening of the following brief narrative (penned by ourselves):

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(1)   Peter and Mary fell in love and wanted to marry. Mary's father wouldn't consent, so they decided to leave town at night (and it was a cold, cold winter's night, and there were wolves out there).

We can, easily enough, imagine this narrative to have either of the following two alternative continuations:

(2)   In the middle of the woods, they fell into a frozen pond, and died.

(3)   In the middle of the woods, they heard the wolves howl, and Mary's father too.

At an intuitive level, while (2) provides the story with an ending, (3) does not. In other words, (2) provides the narrative with *closure*, and (3) does not.

The fact that a narrative may, but need not exhibit closure has been recognized many times, and closure is generally recognized as an important feature of narratives.[1] Unsurprisingly, there also have been many attempts at defining the notion of an "end". The very first one (as far as we know) stems from Aristotle's *Poetics*:

> An end [...] is that which itself naturally occurs, whether necessarily or usually, after a preceding event, but need not be followed by anything else.[2]

Aristotle's primary interest of course lies in the definition of "tragedy", and his proposal concerning the end of the *mythos*, or plot, of a tragedy surely does not settle the matter. Although what he says may indeed be correct, it is hardly informative. As many have noted, we need to know *in what sense* an end "need not be followed by anything else". A straightforward interpretation – namely that there are certain events that have nothing following them in the sense that there are no other events following them – must be ruled out. As the realm of the physical is causally closed, it is certainly not the case that there is some event that, literally, has nothing following it.[3]

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1 See e. g. Kermode (1967, 1978); Brooks (1984: esp. 19–22); Brewer (1985: esp. 186); Holland (2009: 164–170); Torgovnick (1981); Gerlach (1985); Branigan (1992: 20); Krings (2002, 2004); Abbott (2008: 56–66). For a study of closure in poems, see Herrnstein Smith (1968). Note, finally, that the term "closure" is also used in senses different from the one to be developed here; see e. g. Lohafer (1983: 43); Eldridge (2007). We shall return to the distinction of different types of closure in Section 3.1.

2 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450b.

3 See Velleman 2003, 14. – Aristotle, it should be noted, does not attempt to specify what it means for a narrative to have an ending but rather for a *mythos*, or plot. A *mythos*, for Aristotle, is defined as that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end (see *Poetics*, 1450b). Accordingly, if there is no ending, there is no plot either. This definition does not sit well with an understanding of plot according to which the plot of a narrative may, but need not, have an ending. We shall return to the

A look into the more recent literature quickly reveals that there is no consensus among theoreticians as to how the notion of closure is to be defined. Consider only the following examples:

(4)   ["Closure" denotes a] clear outcome in a narrative (e.g. the murderer identified, the male lead married to the female lead).[4]

(5)   Closure denotes the degree to which the complicating event has been resolved and, consequently, how its emotionality has decreased.[5]

These accounts are strikingly different. While in (4), the *definiens* is spelled out solely in terms of what the narrative is about (or, alternatively put, in terms of the plot), in (5) the reader's emotionality plays a decisive role. Furthermore, talk of a "clear outcome" in (4) suggests that "closure" is either present or not, while according to (5) "closure" explicitly refers to the degree to which something is the case, and thus has it that we are dealing with a gradable term.

What is more, the proposals are not only different but we may also wonder whether they are truly informative.[6] (4) defines "closure" in terms of a "clear outcome", but the account does neither really tell us what makes for a clear outcome nor how we can recognize one. Rather, it gives two examples ("the murderer identified, the male lead married to the female lead") which may indeed prompt the question why (or on account of what) they feature closure in the first place. Similar worries may befall us concerning (5). What it takes to "resolve" a "complicating event" is no less in need of explanation than how, and why, our emotionality is involved.

A most notable recent exception to rather sketchy accounts of closure such as (4) and (5) can be found in Noël Carroll's paper "Narrative Closure" (2007).

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notion of plot in Section 3.2. For a survey of the terminological field surrounding the notions of "plot", "mythos", "fabula" etc., see Martínez and Scheffel (1999: 26). These notions have some important semantic overlap, but since they are part of different theories (such as ancient thought about tragedy, formalist aesthetics, or contemporary narratology) they are surely not synonymous. For our purposes, however, this does not matter much. What we are interested in are some hints that may steer our investigation in the right direction, rather than a comprehensive exegesis of the respective accounts.

4 Chandler and Mandey (2011: 289).

5 Habermas and Berger (2011: 208). For further attempts at defining "closure", see the works mentioned in footnote 1.

6 For the sake of fairness, it should be noted that the authors cited so far are not really in the business of defining "closure"; all they give is a brief explication (in a dictionary) or a working definition.

Carroll's very aim is to give a full-blooded account of *narrative closure*. This, and the fact that his approach looks especially promising to us, makes it an ideal starting point for our considerations.[7] Our aim in this paper is to get clearer about the very nature of narrative closure, and we shall proceed as follows. In section two, we shall offer a reconstruction of Carroll's theory. Next, we shall criticize Carroll's account and propose some amendments (Section 3).

2 The erotetic account of narrative closure (Carroll)

In a nutshell, Carroll identifies the phenomenon as follows: "Narrative closure is identified as the phenomenological feeling of finality that is generated when all the questions saliently posed by the narrative are answered."[8] The details of his account unravel as follows:

First, Carroll takes *narrative* closure to be a special kind of closure, i. e. closure that is generated by certain central features of a narrative. He acknowledges that texts other than narratives, and narratives in non-textual media, may exhibit closure (cf. p. 1), and that narratives may exhibit other forms or types of closure (other than *narrative closure*, that is). In what follows, we shall adopt his terminological usage and speak of "narrative closure" (rather than "closure" *simpliciter*) in order to highlight this fact.[9]

Second, Carroll claims that narrative closure centrally involves a mental state that is characterized as a "feeling" (or an "impression" or a "sense") of "finality" or "completeness" (pp. 1, 2 and 5). Carroll, however, does not thereby put the stress on an emotive component of narrative closure.[10] The terms "feeling" or "impression" apparently denote a belief-like state which recipients will probably not be

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7 For all that we know there is but one immediate follow-up paper to Carroll's paper, namely Feagin (2007). Carroll in turn takes up and systematizes a number of remarks made by some predecessors; see note 14 below. Carroll's account looks especially promising, among other things, because we were able to find some empirical support for it cf. note 35 below.

8 Carroll (2007: 1) (further references to Carroll's paper are given in brackets in the main text). The basic idea can be found in earlier works already. Thus Seymour Chatman, under the heading "Closed and Open Plots", writes that "[t]he last event of a narrative may answer all our questions [...]. Such stories have traditional *closure* [...]." (Chatman 1993: 21)

9 The distinction of different types of closure will be a subject of several sections below, most notably Section 3.1.

10 The idea that emotion plays a central role for closure is developed in more detail in David Velleman's (2003) account; see also Miall and Kuiken (2002: 228). See also note 24 below.

able to justify or even express in an orderly manner.[11] What is crucial is the way recipients come to have the belief-like state: "The impression of completeness that makes for closure derives from our estimation, albeit usually tacit, that all our pressing questions regarding the storyworld have been answered" (p. 5), or: "closure then transpires when all of the questions that have been saliently put by the narrative have been answered" (p. 4).

Third, Carroll further specifies the kinds of questions that need to be answered for narrative closure to obtain. He distinguishes between "presiding macro questions", "macro questions", and "micro questions", all posed by the plot of a narrative. The qualification "macro" vs. "micro" pertains to the amount of text covered, and "presiding" pertains to the importance of the questions for an (overall) understanding of the narrative. Thus, "[s]ome questions orchestrate our attention to the emerging story from one end to the other [...]. Questions that structure an entire text or, at least most of it, we can call '*presiding* macro questions'." Micro-questions are those "whose answers are required cognitively to render the answers to the macro-questions intelligible" (p. 10). Carroll has it that "[c]losure obtains when all of the presiding macro-questions and all the micro-questions that are relevant to settling the macro-questions have been answered." (p. 6) Carroll has also something to say about what elements of a narrative are relevant to question formation: "[I]t is primarily the causal inputs in erotetic narratives that rise the presiding macro-questions and the pressing micro-questions whose answers secure closure" (p. 12).[12] Thus, "[n]arrative closure obtains when it is the description of the causal nexus or parts thereof that generates the presiding macro-questions and the subordinate micro-questions that rivet our attention and which finally answers them, thereby eliciting a sense of completeness in us." (p. 13)

Note that, while most of the time Carroll talks as if he merely gives a sufficient condition for narrative closure, at least once he makes it clear that he thinks of this as also necessary for narrative closure: "closure occurs [...] *only* when the informed audience member realizes [all the relevant questions] have been answered" (p. 8, our emphasis).[13]

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11 By calling the feeling "phenomenological", Carroll points to the fact that both readers and the theoretician are faced with a phenomenon that is as yet unexplained.

12 Or: "the questions at issue have been generated narratively" (p. 13), i. e. by the causal framework of the narrative (or, more precisely, by the events that are 'narratively connected' in Carroll's sense).

13 In claiming that closure rests on the audience's reaction, Carroll makes it clear that closure is a response dependent property of (some) narratives. To say that a narrative features closure essentially involves the claim that certain structural features of certain narratives exert a certain effect on certain readers. But is Carroll right in assuming from the start that closure is a

A summary of Carroll's definition of "narrative closure" thus reads:

(**D1**)
   A narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* if, and only if,
1. N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that
2. F is brought about if, and only if, R realizes that all presiding macro-questions posed by the plot of N have been answered.

We call this the "erotetic" account of narrative closure, due to its obvious dependence on the notion of questions (and in order to pay tribute to Noël Carroll who speaks of "erotetic narrative", see p. 5).[14]

   A brief caveat may be in order before we go on. Carroll does not explicitly offer his account of narrative closure in terms of a definition that specifies necessary and sufficient conditions. Is it reasonable to (try to) do so? There is ample evidence that terms that have not been *introduced* by a stipulation in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions simply do not allow for such definitions. And, as noted in the preceding section, people (narratologists and the laymen) have divergent intuitions about narrative closure, and trying to capture all of them might be a hopeless endeavor. While this may be true, we need not aim for the *only* true definition of "narrative closure". In this paper, we are thus interested in some conception of narrative closure which, while adequate to the phenomena, proves fruitful for further studies. Moreover, by *trying* to give an explication, one does almost inevitably learn something about the phenomenon. Thus in the course of trying to arrive

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response dependent property – as opposed to, say, assuming that closure might be a textual phenomenon in the sense that it doesn't involve a reader's response to the text? We shall not pursue this question here. In any case, we have not encountered a purely textual account (that is both informative and non-circular) of closure that does not, at some point, rely on the notion of a recipient's attitude towards the text.

14 Carroll's idea has important predecessors. The idea that closure has something to do with the end of the plot might already be found in Prince (1982) who, in his discussion of "whole-ness" as an important element of "narrativity" (among other remarks) holds that wholeness obtains if "no event preceding or following the sequence of events recounted can be narratively important" (1982: 153), and who speaks of a "feeling of wholeness" (1982: 154). Although Prince does not use this term, this directly pertains to the discussion of narrative closure, if we understand Prince as giving a condition ("wholeness") for closure. Kermode (1978) points to the importance of reader expectations (1978: 145), Chatman (1993) has it that "[t]he last event of a narrative may answer all our questions [...]" (1993: 21), and Herrnstein Smith (1968) already introduces the idea of the structure of a poetic text which keeps it going (see Segal 2007 for a more recent take on Herrnstein Smith's idea). Carroll's account however, while incorporating these ideas, has detailed specifications to offer for all of them.

at a definition of the term, we will come across a number of interesting distinctions, and recognizing these distinctions is a value in itself.

3 Objections and refinements

In this section, we shall pose a number of challenges to Carroll's account, and propose some amendments to the definition of "narrative closure" (**D1**). First, we will examine the scope of the definition, i. e. the question whether it includes only the phenomena we are interested in, and whether it includes all of them (3.1). Second, we shall address the question whether "narrative closure" should be predicated of a narrative, or of a plot of a narrative, or of a narrative relative to a plot-description; the last two options appear to be of interest in order to attain a more finely-grained ascription of narrative closure (3.2). Third, we shall discuss the question whether "narrative closure" should be thought of as a restrictive notion, so that its application requires a certain success – roughly, getting a particular description of the narrative right – on the part of the reader (3.3). Fourth, and finally, we shall ask whether "narrative closure" should be ascribed on the basis of an "online" assessment of a narrative or rather as the result of an *ex post*, all-things-considered judgment (3.4). We shall proceed by proposing amendments to the definition proposed by Carroll, and we shall number the resulting definitions in turn. This will allow for an easy comparison of the versions, it will moreover facilitate cross-references and, eventually, it will lead us to a version that we think is more or less acceptable – although, as we shall point out, surely not the last word on the matter.

3.1 The scope of the definition: too wide or too narrow?

As we have pointed out above, Carroll makes it clear that he takes narrative closure to be but one type or form of closure amongst others. Thus narrative closure is identified as the type of closure that centrally involves the plot of a narrative: it is only when our most pressing questions concerning the plot have been answered that the relevant feeling of finality occurs. We may wonder, however, whether this specification suffices in order to distinguish narrative closure from other forms or types of closure that also centrally involve the plot of a narrative.[15] We may call these other types of closure "thematic closure" and "tellability closure". Let us briefly characterize each of them in turn.

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15 On different types of "story completion", see also Brewer (1996: 264–266). Following Friedman (1975), Brewer distinguishes "event completion", "just world completion", and

Thematic closure occurs once the reader realizes what the narrative is about in the sense that she identifies its central theme or themes. This kind of closure depends on the notion of a work's theme. Here is how Peter Lamarque explains the notion: "To speak of what a work is about, thematically, is to speak of a unifying thread that binds together incident and character in an illuminating way".[16] Lamarque subsequently cites a critic who claims that Jane Austen's *Emma* is "about marriage as an ordeal", and he concludes that this thematic statement "affords a prism through which to view the various couplings and uncouplings that make up the subject" of the novel.[17] Lamarque here draws on a distinction between the subject level of a work and its thematic level, where the former constitutes the story while the latter depends on a more abstract interpretation of the story. This makes it clear that a thematic interpretation depends on the story. You need to know what happens in *Emma* in order to identify its theme or themes. Thus, we take it that the plot of a narrative may pose questions that concern not only other parts of the plot (i. e. questions concerning what happens next in the story), but rather questions concerning what theme or themes the narrative is about. Note that questions of this latter type will be both raised by the plot and answered by the plot. I need to know the ending of *Emma* in order to assess the thematic statement it makes concerning the qualities of marriage.

Further examples come to mind quite easily. Henry James's *The Ambassadors* tells the story of Lambert Strether who is sent to Paris in order to convince some prospective relative to return home to America, and the story tells in great detail all the minor incidents that happen to Strether during his stay on the continent. This is (a very brief version of) the work's subject level. At the thematic level, the novel is much more complex. It involves themes such as the self-fulfillment of a person, his or her emancipation from other people's influence, and the courage it takes to steer one's own way through life. At the subject level, there is not much that happens, and especially the ending of the novel may be taken to be quite unsensational (it is yet another conversation). It is at the thematic level, however, that we may realize that taking one's life into one's own hands may be a matter of

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"moral completion". Segal (2007), on the other hand, while distinguishing three types of "narrative interest", does not use them to distinguish different types of closure. A number of other types of closure are distinguished in Krings (2002). Since we concentrate on an elaboration on the notion of *narrative closure*, rather than giving a survey of all possible types of closure, we shall not comment on them. However, we believe that we can learn something important about narrative closure by contrasting it with what we call "thematic closure" and "tellability closure".

16 Lamarque (2009: 150).
17 Lamarque (2009: 150f.).

small decisions that manifest our autonomy, rather than some dramatic course of events where we will come out as heroes. Thus the unsensational ending of the novel may indeed constitute some cornerstone in our thematic interpretation, and hence constitute a sense of closure: We come to fully understand what the novel wants to tell us at the thematic level.

Yet another example is the following short story by Franz Kafka, known under the title "Give it up":

> It was very early in the morning, the streets clean and deserted, I was on my way to the station. As I compared the tower clock with my watch I realized it was much later than I had thought and that I had to hurry; the shock of this discovery made me feel uncertain of the way, I wasn't very well acquainted with the town as yet; fortunately, there was a policeman at hand, I ran to him and breathlessly asked him the way. He smiled and said: "You asking me the way?" "Yes," I said, "since I can't find it myself." "Give it up! Give it up!" said he, and turned with a sudden jerk, like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.[18]

We do not learn whether the protagonist ever reaches the station, but we do understand that this openness is necessary in order to get the thematic point (something like, say, "Men is disoriented in this world") across.

Thematic closure, then, is plot-driven like Carroll's narrative closure, but surely the two phenomena need to be kept apart. A novel may feature narrative closure but no thematic closure (since the plot simply does not tell us what the narrative is about on the thematic level). Or it may possess thematic closure but no narrative closure, because the plot does not answer all questions as to what happens next but gives us a clear sense of what the narrative is about on the thematic level. James's *The Ambassadors* or Kafka's "Give it up" are cases in point: we do not get to know what happens next to Strether, and in particular whether he actually manages to take his life into his own hands in the future; but we do realize (on the thematic level) that this kind of insecurity is part of what personal autonomy is actually all about. Something similar holds true for Kafka's short story. Here, we do not learn whether the protagonist reaches the station, but this is precisely what helps to convey the thematic point of the short story. Accordingly, there is thematic closure but not narrative closure in both the novel and the short story.

So let us now turn to "tellability closure". "Tellability" is narratology's coinage. The term is meant to capture the fact that stories may or may not have a point. Originating from oral storytelling, the notion rests on the observation that telling stories is subject to certain pragmatic constraints. Here is William Labov's original observation on what he termed "evaluation" in a narrative:

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18 Kafka (1971: 456).

[Evaluation is] the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its raison d'être: why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at. There are many ways to tell the same story, to make very different points, or to make no point at all. Pointless stories are met (in English) with the withering rejoinder, "So what?" Every good narrator is continually warding off this question; when his narrative is over, it should be unthinkable for a bystander to say, "So what?" Instead, the appropriate remark would be, "He did?" or similar means of registering the reportable character of the events of the narrative.[19]

Thus, when telling a story, my listeners, at some point, must realize what I am getting at. They need to get the very point of the narrative. Otherwise, they will turn their backs on me. We take it that tellability is a feature of literary (as opposed to oral) narratives too, and that once a reader is getting the point of a narrative she will have a sense of closure. What is more, getting the point of a narrative may, and indeed should, centrally involve the plot. Responding "So what?" or "He did?", respectively, will be based on what happened on the subject level of the narrative. (The question "He did?", cited by Labov, makes it especially clear that the narrative will typically involve a person's deeds and that they are relevant here.)[20] And, just as in the case of thematic closure, it is obvious that narrative closure (as defined by **D1**) and tellability closure need not coincide. Indeed, it may be the very point of a narrative to have no narrative closure. Thus I might tell our brief narrative (1) (see above) in order to get across what it means for a story to be incomplete. Getting the idea of a story that features no narrative closure, and hence the point of (1), will centrally involve the realization that the narrative neither features a proper ending nor narrative closure.

In sum, then, we think that as long as a definition of narrative closure does not rule out instances of thematic closure or tellability closure, the definition is too inclusive. (**D1**) may be meant to exclude these types of closure, but we better make sure that it does so explicitly.

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19 Labov (1972: 366); cf. Labov and Waletzky (1997: esp. 28 ff.); for a summary, cf. Toolan (2001: Ch. 6).
20 Apparently, however, narrative's tellability need not centrally involve the plot. Take, e. g., the following joke: "A man camped in a national park, and noticed Mr. Snake and Mrs. Snake slithering by. 'Where are all the little snakes?' he asked. Mr. Snake replied, 'We are adders, so we cannot multiply.' The following year, the man returned to the same camping spot. This time there were a whole batch of little snakes. 'I thought you said you could not multiply,' he said to Mr. Snake. 'Well, the park ranger came by and built a log table, so now we can multiply by adding!'" (The snake joke is taken from: http://komplexify.com/epsilon/2008/12/19/snake-joke-i/ [Date of access: January 26th, 2015]) On the level of the plot the snake's answers make no sense whatsoever. Nonetheless recipients can get the point of the narrative and, hence, the joke. In any case, the theoretical possibility that there is a narrative which features tellability that does not rest on the plot should be acknowledged.

One way of doing so involves bringing to the fore the distinction between the plot of a narrative as the *object* of presiding macro questions on the one hand, and the plot as providing *grounds* for presiding macro questions on the other. If a presiding macro question has the plot as its object, then an answer to the question will involve reference to an element of the plot. Our brief narrative (1), for instance, triggers the presiding macro question "Will Peter and Mary get married?", and an answer to this question involves the information whether or not they get married. If, on the contrary, a presiding macro question has its grounds in the plot, then the *formation* of the question will involve reference to the plot, but the *answer* to the question (characteristically) will not do so. Consider again the example of Kafka's "Give it up": the plot of the narrative justifies the question "What is men's position in universe?" (or something similar), but an answer to this question involves a thematic statement, not an information concerning what is true in the fiction (i. e. a plot-description).

Now, saying that the plot of a narrative may pose certain questions, as **D1** has it, may be read in either way, but only the interpretation according to which the plot features in answers to the presiding macro questions is sufficiently restrictive for an account of narrative (as opposed to thematic or tellability) closure. Hence we propose the following amendment to our definition:

(**D2**)
　　A narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* if, and only if,
1.　N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that
2.　F is brought about if, and only if, R realizes that all presiding macro-questions that have the plot of N as an object have been answered.

Let us now turn to the question whether Carroll's theory indeed captures necessary conditions for narrative closure. We think that it does not. The problem lies in what Carroll takes to be an essential feature of the plot of a narrative. For Carroll, plots are constituted by a causal nexus. To repeat from Section 1 above, Carroll claims that "[n]arrative closure obtains when it is the description of the causal nexus or parts thereof that generates the presiding macro-questions" (p. 13). But it seems that we can think of texts that qualify as having a narrative connection between their events although there is no causal nexus amongst the events.[21]

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21 This observation has been made many times, see e. g. Velleman 2003. Carroll himself, in addition to the sufficient condition cited above, also presents the claim that "it is *primarily* the causal inputs in erotetic narratives that raise the presiding macro-questions whose answers secure cosure [...]" (12, our emphasis), and that "only some of the events at issue need be causally connected" (11). For reasons of exposition, we hold Carroll here to his stronger claim.

Moreover, these narratives may have narrative closure or not. Consider Aristotle's brief summary of the story of Mitys: "Mitys' statue at Argos killed the murderer of Mitys, by falling on him as he looked at it".[22] The example is put forward by David Velleman precisely to demonstrate that, although there is no causal nexus between the murder and the death of the murderer, we will be inclined to have a sense of closure once the story is over.[23] Velleman subsequently dismisses an account of closure that is based on the notion of the questions posed by a plot and focuses on closure as a purely affective phenomenon. But maybe one need not go that far.[24] All we need to acknowledge is that the plot of a narrative need not consist of a causal nexus. Luckily, neither (**D1**) nor (**D2**) are committed to any such claim, so the definitions may, on this score, be accepted as they stand. We just need to be wary of not bringing in too narrow an understanding of plot.

3.2 Fineness of grain: different plots, different narrative closure?

The definition (**D2**) that we have arrived at based on Carroll's account has it that narrative closure is predicated of narratives. Thus it is a narrative that has or hasn't narrative closure, depending on what its plot is like (and what questions it raises and subsequently answers). It is this claim that we shall question now. Before we

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Feagin (2007) stresses the importance of psychological connections, but thinks that they are covered by Carroll's account (see 2007: 21).

22 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a.

23 See Velleman 2003: 5–7. Carroll (2007) already reacts to Velleman's account, but does not discuss Velleman's strongest case, the story of Mitys. Two possible replies seem to be open to Carroll. He could either claim that there is a subtle (intrafictional) psychological connection between the relevant events which in turn falls under his causality concept. Or he could argue that the story has closure, but not narrative closure. One would then have to specify the new type of closure, since it surely is neither tellabillity closure nor thematic closure. It seems to us that both replies can be met by new counterexamples, but we don't pursue the point any further. Fortunately for his erotetic account of closure, Carroll is mistaken in thinking that successful criticism of his account of a narrative connection "would not only undermine my theory of narrative but also my account of the way in which narratives raise questions, since my account is fundamentally dependent upon the causal component of the narrative connection." (Carroll 2007: 13) The notion of narrative closure obviously depends on a notion of narrative, but it does not presuppose a causal conception of the nexus between events.

24 Actually, any account that takes closure to be a purely affective phenomenon ought to answer the questions how the relevant emotions are identified, and what causes them in the first place. We take it that there is a good chance that the answers to these questions will bring up plots and questions raised by the plot. Moreover, it seems that an affective account has great difficulties in distinguishing narrative closure from thematic closure and tellability closure.

can do so, however, we need to be clearer about what we mean by "narrative" and "plot" in the first place. Both the notions of "narrative" and of "plot" are highly contested in the literature, and we shall not try to supply a definition of either term here.[25] Luckily, we need not do so in order to tackle the question that is of interest to us in this section (or in this paper). All we need is the, hopefully less controversial, assumption that there is a particular difference between narratives on the one hand and plots on the other. The difference we want to capture is this: a narrative, as we use the term, is a syntactic entity that consists of the words or sentences (i. e. the overt linguistic material) that are uttered by a person at a particular time. Narratives thus immediately result from acts of storytelling.[26] A plot, as we use the term, is something different. It is not a part (nor an element nor a "level") of a narrative, but rather a particular dimension of its interpretation. Identifying a plot is a particular way of describing a narrative. Thus you get the plot of a narrative by giving a particular content-related description of it. This description (a) identifies the main events the narrative is about and (b) shows how these events are connected.[27] Plot descriptions rest on interpretations, for one needs to rank the events a narrative is about according to their importance, and one needs to supplement meaningful connections between the events that are not explicitly stated in the text.[28] Or, to invoke the terminology we have appealed to above: a narrative may involve an extremely complex subject level, i. e. many people, places and incidents that are presented by the narrative in any order and from any perspective (etc.). The task of establishing the plot will involve establishing the temporal order of some main events and an account of how these events hang together.

   With these rudimentary clarifications of "narrative" and "plot" in mind, we can now turn to an exposition of our problem with (**D2**) as it stands. Some narratives appear to feature more than one plot. By this we do not mean that a narrative may feature more than one *sub*plot, such that the main course of events (i. e. the plot from start to finish, as is were) is complemented with additional (possibly

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25 For some recent discussion, see e. g. the entries on "narrativity" and "plot" in the *Handbook of Narratology* (Hühn et al. 2014).

26 And, we may add, they constitute a vast variety of genres, such as the short story, the novel, conversational storytelling, etc. The notion of narrative closure to be developed here is meant to be applicable to all of them. Whether it actually is, and whether particular narrative genres pose particular problems for its application, remains to be seen, of course.

27 For an explanation of this understanding of plot, see Nehamas (1983). For some elaboration, see Henning (2009: 183–189). Needless to say, there is no consensus in narratology how the term "plot" is to be used. Friedman (1975: 75), for instance, appears to use "plot" for what we, following Lamarque, have called the subject level of a narrative.

28 The term "meaningful connection" ("sinnhafte Verknüpfung") is Henning's, compare again his 2009, esp. 183–189.

embedded) smaller plots that, say, explain a main character's background or tell the story of one of her brothers. Rather, we want to draw attention to the fact that some narratives actually seem to ask for more than just one plot-description.[29] In these cases, understanding the narrative centrally involves the reconstruction of more than just one plot. Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* is a case in point. The novel famously features fifteen different points of view on a particular course of events, namely the death of Addie Bundren and her family's troublesome experiences on their trip to the burial site somewhere in the United States. In 59 chapters, each of the fifteen characters tells his or her own story about the events, so to speak. As a result, *As I Lay Dying* invites the reconstruction of many different plot-descriptions, depending on whose point of view you take as a basis. If, for instance, you decide to focus on Anse's (the deceased woman's widower) point of view, you may notice that the novel has narrative closure. For Anse, the trip has the goal of getting rid of some burden and getting a new wife and new teeth (*sic*). For his illegitimate son, Jewel, by contrast, the trip is all about getting emancipated from Anse, and the question whether he manages to do so in the end does not get answered. For yet another son, the trip to the burial site is about fulfilling his mother's last wish, and it is at best unclear whether the final events of the novel count as answering the latent question whether Addie's last wish does get fulfilled. Yet another character, Addie Bundren's daughter, needs the trip in order to free herself from an unwanted unborn child. The question whether she manages to do so does not get answered. And so on. In sum, each of the characters invites a different plot-description of the events, and each of them elicits different 'presiding macro questions', some of which do get answered in the end while others don't. So, we may wonder, does the novel have narrative closure?

It seems that (**D2**) is not sufficiently clear on the matter. The definition is based on the assumption that there is such a thing as *the* plot of a narrative. But, having realized that talk of a narrative's "plot" is best understood in terms of giving a plot-description of the narrative, and that some narratives ask for more than one plot description, we have reason to doubt that the definition is yet helpful with regard to an assessment of cases like Faulkner's novel. Several options come to mind.

The first option involves, so to speak, digging in one's heels and insisting that there is no narrative closure in the novel, simply because, obviously, not all

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29 We thus also do not want to invoke the idea that, since plot descriptions may depend on interpretations and there may be more than just one reasonable interpretation, there may be more than one reasonable plot-identifying description of any narrative. While this may be true, in what follows we want to focus on cases where a novel actually *asks* for more than one plot description. (However, we shall also turn to the question of correctness in Section 3.3.)

presiding macro questions get answered. This option is well in line with (**D2**). We may, however, adapt the definition to the insight that there may not be such a thing as *the* plot-description of a narrative, but rather several ones. Hence we get something like this:

(**D3**)

A narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* if, and only if,
1. N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that
2. F is brought about if, and only if, R realizes that all presiding macro-questions posed by all plot-descriptions of N that have the plots of N as an object have been answered.

We find (**D3**) wanting. It assimilates Faulkner's novel – in terms of narrative closure – to our narrative (1) which you may recall from the introduction. But Faulkner's novel, one may insist, *has* narrative closure according to some plot descriptions. The difference between a narrative that has no narrative closure and a narrative that has narrative closure according to some plot description should be acknowledged.[30]

A second option takes the case of Faulkner's novel to suggest that "narrative closure" is a gradable predicate. Thus a novel may feature a certain degree of narrative closure, rather than having narrative closure or not. Accordingly, we may define as follows:

(**D4**)

A narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* to a degree D if, and only if,
1. N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that
2. F is brought about if, and only if, R realizes that a certain amount of the presiding macro-questions that have the plots of N as an object have been answered.

At first sight, (**D4**) sits well with the intuition that a feeling of finality may come in different strengths. Thus some narratives may leave us with a very strong sense

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30 D3, however, may invite a distinction between *partial* closure and *full* closure, such that partial closure is defined (roughly) as the feeling of finality that is brought about if, and only if, the reader realizes that all presiding macro-questions posed by *some* plot-description of the narrative have been answered. *Full* closure, in turn, is defined on the basis of partial closure with the addendum that there is no alternative plot description according to which there are presiding macro questions that do not get answered. Thanks to Nathan Wildman for pointing this out to us.

that the plot has a proper ending, while others feature a nagging cliffhanger, and still others leave us in doubt. In searching for the grounds of the respective strengths of our feelings, we may find that only a certain amount of questions have been answered, or that certain questions have only been partially answered, or that the answers we get are but more or less plausible. (Remember that we are dealing with literary narratives, and we certainly must not presuppose too much unambiguousness in this realm.) However, it is not clear whether, generally, the strength of the sense of finality actually corresponds to the amount or quality of the answers to our presiding macro questions. Maybe, we can feel a strong sense of finality *à propos* a particular plot-description, and have a different feeling once we contemplate a different plot-description of the same narrative, rather than some "intermediate" feeling that is based on an all things considered judgment concerning all possible plot-descriptions, all presiding macro questions and their respective answers. A resort to the putative gradeability of "narrative closure" seems to be a rather superficial solution to the actual problem posed by novels such as *As I Lay Dying*. Moreover, the idea that narrative closure allows for degrees is hardly plausible in cases such as narrative (1). These cases, it seems, either have narrative closure or not. There is a particular question that needs to be answered, and this either happens or not. In these cases, it is not even clear what it means that "narrative closure" is gradable. Also, prime examples of gradable terms such as "hard", "strong", or "warm", involve a comparison such that e. g. a surface X is considered harder than a surface Y if it is possible to scratch Y by X but not the other way around.[31] Again, it is not clear whether we can make sense of comparisons between narratives (or even between versions of a narrative) in the case of narrative closure. And as long as this is the case, we do not really know how to interpret variable D in definition (**D4**).

At this point, we leave the discussion of gradeability and return to our initial observation *à propos* Faulkner's novel. In order to allow for a more finely grained attribution of narrative closure, we should strengthen the notion of *plot* in the definition. The first way is to relativize narrative closure to plots. Thus we get:

(**D5**)

A narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* relative to a plot-description P if, and only if,
1. N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that

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31 The example is taken from Kutschera (1972: 20 f.). There is a certain standard linguistic behavior of gradable terms, see e. g. the discussion of *know* in Stanley (2004). (Thanks to Stacie Friend for alerting us to the discussion of gradeability in the literature.) However, since "closure" is a technical term, we cannot really argue against the gradeability of "closure" on the basis of an apparent lack of typical gradeability-behavior. Maybe these uses have to be invented first.

2. F is brought about if, and only if, R realizes that all presiding macro-questions that have P of N as an object have been answered.

Alternatively, we can predicate "narrative closure" of the plot in the first place:

(**D6**)

A plot P of a narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* if, and only if,

1. N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that
2. F is brought about if, and only if, R realizes that all presiding macro-questions that have plot P of N as an object have been answered.

(**D5**) and (**D6**) look very similar. Both allow for a more-finely grained ascription of narrative closure than our original definition, and they both dissolve the seeming paradox that a novel such as *As I Lay Dying* has both narrative closure and not narrative closure. A little later on, *à propos* our discussion of the distinction between online vs. *post hoc* ascriptions of "narrative closure" (see Section 3.4), we shall voice a faint preference for (**D5**). At this point, however, both options should be acknowledged.

3.3 Is "narrative closure" a restrictive notion?

Our definitions of "narrative closure" considered so far unanimously claim that for narrative closure to obtain, the reader must realize that the presiding macro-questions posed by (certain aspects of) a narrative must be answered. What is left open by this is whether these answers must also be correct. Let us start by considering two answers that come to mind immediately.

First, we may assume that a "feeling of finality" need not be based on a correct understanding of a novel. Whether we are right in thinking that the novel features a particular plot (and that it raises certain presiding macro questions which then get answered or not answered in a particular way) need not affect whether or not we have a sense of an ending.

An accordant notion of narrative closure that is based on a mere thought (irrespective of its truth) has some important consequences for the usefulness of "narrative closure" as an analytic tool. If we take it that for narrative closure to obtain it is enough if some reader merely, and possibly erroneously, *thinks* that the novel features a particular plot (etc.), then narrative closure is not tied to other properties of the text (i. e. properties that the text actually must possess for narrative closure to obtain). This poses a problem for disputes about whether or not a text possesses narrative closure. If I assert that, for me, the novel does feature narrative closure and you disagree, then there is no use in pointing to other structural features of the text

that are either present or not. My thought that the novel has narrative closure is enough to vindicate my attribution. Narrative closure, then, is not really a property of the text but, in Hamlet's words, "only thinking makes it so". This may limit the usefulness of the notion in the narratologist's analytical toolbox. Narratologists typically want to analyze the *text*, i. e. understand its structure. Reader responses, we take it, may be a route to understanding the text, but they are not the main objective of a *narratological* investigation. Note, however, that this is nothing but a particular focus of interest. Other foci of interest are not only possible but also legitimate. Since narrative closure, as Carroll and many others have argued, is a response dependent property of texts, it is well worth studying what exactly the reader response in question consists in. While we cannot even begin to approach an empirical study here, a few remarks may be in order.[32] First, any empirical study must be clear about what data it collects. While this claim may amount to a truism, it presents some thorny questions when it comes to investigating narrative closure. For remember that there are many different notions of closure, i. e. many different respects in which a text can be said to end. *Narrative closue*, which pertains the end of the *plot*, is but one of them.[33] If you merely present your readers with a story and ask "Has this come to an end?", then you will be unable to tell whether they have responded to the property of narrative closure, or rather something else. So different notions of closure must be disentangled first (which is what we try to do in this paper).[34] Second, narrative closure cannot be measured *directly*, i. e., there is no scale of measurement which would lend itself to the representation of (perceived vs. "real") narrative closure, as is the case e. g. for psychophysical notions like *loudness*. One therefore needs to start by finding *empirical correlates* of properties that can be said to be constitutive of narrative closure. Third, narrative closure is not only a response-dependent property of texts; it is also a macro-structural phenomenon in that it depends on larger amounts of text. This presents great difficulties for empirical studies. For one, it is generally difficult to control all relevant variables when dealing with texts (rather than with, say, single words or phrases). Moreover, it is difficult to manipulate the stimuli in a controlled way. Finally, it is difficult to actually measure with any precision reader responses that pertain to a phenomenon as vague as a "feeling of finality".[35]

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32 An anonymous reviewer for *JLS* has alerted us to this.

33 Cf. above, Section 3.1.

34 Cf. also Wollheim (1993: 80).

35 To the best of our knowledge, there are but a few empirical studies on narrative closure so far, cf. Brewer (1996) and Lohafer (2003). Lohafer (2003) asked 180 readers to indicate sentences of stories which could be said to end the story ("preclosure points"). For each reader the five choices nearest to the actual end of the story were recorded. She then took these findings in order to look for signals which might have prompted the closure impression, resulting in an impressive

Luckily, we need not solve these problems here, for we are engaged in the much easier narratological project of conceptual clarification. Let us therefore return to the second option according to which readers must get it right for narrative closure to obtain. This assumption makes "narrative closure" a restrictive notion. It implies some sort of success on the part of the reader, namely a successful plot-description as well as a successful realization of the presiding macro-questions and of their respective answers. Accordingly, the attribution of narrative closure implies that the narrative also features certain other structural features. If a reader merely (and erroneously) thinks that some questions have been put and answered by the text, this does not suffice for the text to actually have narrative closure. Furthermore, this option allows us to make sense of interpretive disputes about narrative closure. If two interpreters quarrel about whether or not a particular narrative features narrative closure or not, then they may argue over whether one of them has got it right. (Maybe we cannot actually decide who is right in the end; but we can make sense of their quarrel.)

Do we need to amend our definition(s) in order to account for "narrative closure" as a restrictive notion? No, not as long as we read "realize" as a success word, thus implying that the realization meets some appropriate standard of correctness.[36] Here's (**D5**) again:

A narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* relative to a plot-description P if, and only if,
1. N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that
2. F is brought about if, and only if, R realizes that all presiding macro-questions that have P of N as an object have been answered.

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catalogue of such signals. The question if any of these signals cold be used to define closure or would make for a useful empirical correlate of closure, however, remains open. Brewer presented two stories to readers. Each story had three versions: one version with a good ending, one version with a bad ending, and one version with a so-called didactic ending, a phenomenon first noted by Shklovsky (cf. note 40 below). Readers were then asked to rate the stories on a number of scales. While Brewer does not discuss narrative closure explicitly, he reports that readers rated stories with bad endings as less complete than stories with good endings, while didactic endings came out somewhere in between. In Klauk/Köppe/Weskott (to appear in: *diegesis* 5.1. 2016) we designed a rating study in which we systematically varied experimental texts and asked a group of our students ($N = 24$) to judge these manipulated texts. Our goal was to get a first start towards a notion of narrative closure that is empirically valid and to explore what the defining components of narrative closure are. Our results reveal two empirical correlates of narrative closure: if a text features narrative closure, then readers have the impression that the story is complete, and they have no further questions concerning the text. This is well in line with the accounts of closure developed by Carroll and in this paper, and it constitutes some evidence for the empirical validity of the "erotetic" account of narrative closure.

36 Cf. Ryle (2001: 130 f., 149–153), for details on "success words".

However, in order to make it clear that "realize" is a success word, and that the success in question *depends* on correct ascriptions of plot, presiding macro-questions and answers, we may also substitute the claim that the feeling of finality is "brought about by a certain realization" with the claim that the underlying textual structure warrants the feeling of finality:

(**D7**)

A narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* relative to a plot-description P if, and only if,

1. N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that
2. F is warranted by the fact that all presiding macro-questions that have P of N as an object have been answered.

(**D7**) makes it clear that the link between narrative and reader is not merely causal, such that the narrative causes a belief (or belief-like state), but also epistemic. The text warrants, or justifies, a certain attitude on the side of the reader.[37] This also gives us some first clue as to how the notion of an "informed reader" that features in the definitions should be understood.[38]

At this point, however, a whole new set of problems opens up which we shall mention and then, rather quickly, leave. So far, we have only considered two options in response to the success-issue, namely that the attribution of narrative closure is either based on a correct understanding of the narrative or not. But understandings of narratives, it seems, can be more or less complete, or successful, or mature, or the like.[39] Interpretation in literary studies is hardly, if ever, a clear-cut issue. Are there any general, or maybe narrative closure-specific, criteria?

These are important and intricate questions, and we cannot hope to give a sufficient answer to them here. The question of what makes an interpretation correct is, in most general terms, not narrative closure-specific, of course. So it is not reasonable to burden a theory of narrative closure with the task of untying these knotty knots. There are, however, also certain narrative closure-specific problems which have been noted in the literature, and which a more fully developed theory of narrative closure should address. Consider what has been

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37 Given that we want to preserve the intuition that the recipient need not be able to justify the feeling of finality, we can think of warrant as a relation that holds (or does not hold) independent of her or his conscious judgments; for the distinction between such "externalist" and "internalist" accounts of epistemic justification, see e. g. Williams (2001: Ch. 2).

38 We will take up the notion of an "informed reader" towards the end of Section 3.4 below.

39 On the broad range of evaluative criteria for literary interpretation, see e. g. Strube (1992). This may also at least partially account for the idea that "narrative closure" seems to be a "subjective" notion, as an anonymous reviewer for *JLS* has put it.

called "illusory endings". In an early study on the structure of narrative, Viktor Shklovsky thus

> speaks of the ease with which the reader may be induced to supply his own ending by the provision of some observation about the scenery or the weather; [...]. Such endings have nothing to do with raveling or unraveling; they simply say the cold got colder, or the plain stretched out interminably.[40]

In this spirit, we might have provided our introductory narrative (1) with an "illusory ending" like "And the cold got colder, and the woods stretched out interminably." Would an interpretation according to which this "ending" answers all presiding macro-questions of the plot count?[41] How are we to decide?

Clearly, the text must play a decisive role in deciding the matter. In his paper on narrative closure, Noël Carroll suggests that linguistics has some important things to say about how texts raise questions and subsequently answer them. Indeed, it has been proposed that there are ways to represent discourse structure as based on questions and answers. Once we know more about the textual mechanisms of question formation, and the logics of discourse questions and answers, we can be more precise as to what questions a text actually raises and whether it answers them.[42] It is not to be expected, however, that raising questions (or answering them) can be accounted for as a purely *textual* matter. Reader expectations play an important role too.[43] Thus, on account of its structural features, a text raises certain questions only given

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40 Kermode (1978: 146). Cf. note 35 above.

41 It seems that it is especially difficult to disentangle narrative closure from thematic closure and tellability closure in these cases; see **D2** and our respective discussion above (Section 3.1). Also, note that sophisticated readers of our introductory story (1) might want to interpret continuation (3) such that Mary and Peter were eaten by wolves while Mary's father despairs. Under such a reading, (3) provides the story with closure.

42 See Groenendijk and Roelofsen (2009) and, most recently, Onea (2015). We plan to pursue this issue in a follow-up paper.

43 As an anonymous reviewer for *JLS* pointed out to us, these expectations depend on the reader's background knowledge which may be cognitively organized as narrative "templates" or schemata (cf. Mandel 1984). Many of these schemata have some "cultural currency" and can therefor be drawn on by both authors and readers. Reference to such schemata may also help us to explain why other possible continuations to our example narrative (1) come to mind quite easily. Note also that the account of narrative closure developed in this paper suggests an answer to the non-trivial question of what *counts* as a possible, i. e. acceptable, continuation of the story: a continuation is acceptable (and in this sense possible) if it gives answers to some question that have been raised by the story so far. We would hypothesize that the narrative "templates" just referred to have a particularly perspicuous erotetic structure which in fact constitutes their cognitive usefulness.

that the reader has certain abilities which include knowledge and the capacity to anticipate on its basis.[44]

3.4 Presiding macro questions: Online or ex post?

Whether or not we have a deeper understanding of the linguistic means of question formation, there is another problem apparent from the superficial understanding of presiding macro-questions that we have established so far. Sometimes, it seems, we reconstruct presiding macro questions only *ex post*. After completing the story, we get a very different understanding of what the story is all about – different from our initial expectations that we formed *online*, in the course of reading. Consider the following examples:[45]

(6)　　Longed for him. Got him. Shit.
　　　(Margaret Atwood)

(7)　　Corpse parts missing. Doctor buys yacht.
　　　(Margaret Atwood)

(8)　　Dinosaurs return. Want their oil back.
　　　(David Brin*)*

What is striking about these stories[46] is that, presumably, you have a different idea what the story is about *after* you have completed reading them than you have had after reading the first sentence only. Let us take a closer look at each of the stories in turn.

Starting with (6), one may take the question "Did you get him?" to constitute the presiding macro-question that structures our understanding of the text. When reading the last sentence of the story, however, it becomes clear that this is not really what the story is all about. For, in the end, what the story is all about is how the subsequent relationship between the two characters turned out *after* the narrating I got his or her partner. The story ends with the information

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44 This pertains to yet another aspect of the notion of the "informed reader": it is she who has the relevant background knowledge.

45 Taken from the magazine *Wired*, issue 14.11 (November 2006). URL: http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/sixwords.html (accessed January 20th, 2015).

46 Let us, if only for the sake of argument, agree that these are narratives. For slightly more developed stories that will prove our point, see the altogether delightful examples in Abbott (2008: 56).

that the relationship ends badly, rather than with the information that there is a relationship in the first place. This suggests that the complete text is structured by the presiding macro-question "How does the relationship turn out?" (or something like this). This question, however, is hardly prompted already by the very beginning of the story, and it thus cannot be said to structure our subsequent understanding of the story. It is only *post hoc* that we realize its importance for our understanding the story.

Now consider (7). The first sentence, arguably, evokes an interest in the missing corpse parts and triggers something like "Where are they?" and "How did they get lost?" The story, however, closes in a way that does not exactly answer these questions. Rather, what does get answered is the question "Who did it?" So, in this case, we do not only (such as in (6)) have a case where a question gets answered that does not get posed in the beginning. Rather, in (7) a question that does get posed in the beginning does not get answered in the end, for we do not learn anything about the whereabouts of the corpse parts, nor do we learn how they got lost. We understand that the story is all about some shady doctor and how he invests his money. So, does this story feature narrative closure despite the openness of the initially posed questions?

Our last example (8) is a case in point too. Once we learn that the dinosaurs return, it is natural to ask "(Oh My God) What happens?" But instead of answering this question, the text informs us about the dinosaurs' motives. Again, arguably, there is a presiding macro-question posed by the (beginning of) the story that does not get answered in the end, and another presiding macro-question ("Why do the dinosaurs return?") that does get answered. Does the story feature narrative closure?

In these cases, we can associate different sets of questions with a particular narrative, depending on whether we ask for questions that structure our online understanding, or on whether we ask for questions that structure our all-things-considered understanding of the narrative. Both sets of questions may coincide but, as we hope to have shown by way of the examples, they need not. Accordingly, our judgment of whether the stories exhibit narrative closure may vary depending on which set of questions – online or *post hoc* – we take to be decisive. So, should narrative closure be taken to depend on the one or on the other?

Both phenomena should be of interest to the student of narrative. Sometimes we are interested in how a narrative guides us through a process of understanding with all its twists and turns. The examples (6) to (8) nicely show that, by omitting the fact that the narratives pose certain questions at certain points and eventually only answer some of them, something important about these texts would be lost. Arguably, it is the gist of these small texts that

they play with their reader's expectations as to what gets answered and what does not. (This is what makes the stories funny). But there are of course also serious stories which depend on our wondering what happens, and which do not answer any presiding macro questions; see Kafka's "Give it up", discussed above in Section 3.1.

However, the fact that the assessment of narrative closure may depend on different (sets of) questions, depending on our online-understanding or our all things considered-understanding, should not seduce us into assuming that, accordingly, we have two different notions of narrative closure (say, "online-closure" and "all-things-considered-closure"). Too great a proliferation of notions of closure runs in danger of losing sight of our goal of sharpening the concept. So maybe there is an alternative route.

We have already seen that what we take to be the presiding macro-questions of a narrative depends on the plot-description that we impose on the narrative. What is special about our example narratives (6) to (8) seems to be that they initially invite a plot-description that is different from the plot-description they demand in the end. So, indeed, (**D5**) might be all we need in order to capture the distinction we have detected. If we insert our initially (online) formed plot description for P, then the stories do not feature narrative closure (in the case of (7) and (8), at least). They do so, however, if we insert a different plot description that is based on an all-things-considered interpretation. So, again, we are left with the result that some narratives allow for, or even ask for, more than one plot description. This time, however, we are not speaking of different plot-descriptions that cover the narrative from start to finish, but rather of different plot-descriptions that are tailored to different sections of the narrative, or stages of its interpretation process.[47]

Let us close our consideration of online vs. *post-hoc* ascriptions of narrative closure with a note on the notion of the "informed reader" that features in our definitions.[48] What we have seen so far allows us to be more precise about her abilities (i. e. what makes her "informed"). "Informed" should not be taken to imply that the informed reader is simply he or she who always gets things right. That would make the account completely uninformative. Rather, we have some

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[47] It turns out, then, that our theory can account for Lohafer's idea of "preclosure points" in narratives (cf. Lohafer 2003): a narrative text usually allows for different plot-descriptions, and a narrative (roughly) features a "preclosure point" if it allows for a plot description that (a) does not cover the whole text and (b) answers all presiding macro questions pertaining to this plot description. The theory of "preclosure points", therefore, does not require us to doubt, or alter, our definition.

[48] Carroll doesn't say much about this, see his 2007: 8.

indication about what exactly the concept ought to cover. An all-things-considered judgment about the narrative closure property must certainly be one which is based on a complete reading of the text. So the informed reader is she who has all relevant information. Furthermore, the informed reader is aware of the possibility that a narrative may allow for, or even ask for, different plot descriptions. Also, the informed reader knows about the standards of interpretation that allow us to assess the qualities of (hypotheses about) plot-descriptions. And, finally, she knows the linguistic (and other) rules on which question-formation on the basis of plot-description depends, and she has the relevant background knowledge to apply these rules to particular cases.

4 Summary

In discussing Carroll's proposal as to how define "narrative closure", we have come across a number of distinctions that allow us to further characterize the closure phenomenon. These distinctions concern the differentiation of different forms or types of closure, and hence the scope of the definition, the question in what way the ascription of "narrative closure" depends on a plot-description of a narrative, the question whether "narrative closure" should be thought of as a restrictive notion that requires a certain success, and the question whether "narrative closure" should be ascribed on the basis of an online assessment of a narrative or rather as the result of a *post hoc*, all-things-considered judgment.

Is it possible to summarize our findings in a single definition? Not quite. We have not decided whether **D5** (relativizing narrative closure to plot-descriptions) or **D6** (predicating "narrative closure" of plots) is preferable. Since **D5** came in handy when describing the difference between all-things-considered vs. online ascriptions of "narrative closure", however, we feel that it exhibits a slight advantage over **D6**. But that may be a matter of taste. Also, we have decided to provide the notion of narrative closure for the narratologist's analytic toolbox, and that suggests that we consider it a restrictive notion that involves criteria of success in its application.

So this is how we propose to define "narrative closure":

(**D8**)
A narrative N exhibits *narrative closure* relative to a plot-description P if, and only if,
1. N evokes in its informed reader R a feeling of finality F, such that
2. F is brought about if, and only if, R realizes that all presiding macro-questions that have the plot of N as an object have been answered;

3. F is warranted by the fact that all presiding macro-questions that have the plot of N as an object have been answered.

As we have acknowledged at the beginning of this paper, our definition may cover but one way of thinking about the closure phenomenon. In particular, we haven't had much to say about the emotive side of the matter. Building on Carroll's "erotetic" account, in any case, has proven to be a useful way of keeping the emotive side of closure out of the definition of the term "narrative closure". That of course does not mean that closure is not more or less intimately linked to emotions. Spelling out the details of this, however, will have to await another occasion. Finally, we have confined ourselves to an account of *verbal* narratives.[49] The erotetic account of closure, however, presumably need not confine itself to the verbal medium. There are other media that tell stories, and questions can be raised, and answered, by these media too. It is an interesting task – again, beyond the scope of this paper – to spell out the erotetic details of these media, and an accordant notion of narrative closure, too.

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49 Cf. our brief reference to the notion of "narrative" at the beginning of Section 3.2.

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