

## 48 Narrative Structure

### THE HAND

I smacked my little boy. My anger was powerful. Like justice. Then I discovered no feeling in the hand. I said, "Listen, I want to explain the complexities to you." I spoke with seriousness and care, particularly of fathers. He asked, when I finished, if I wanted him to forgive me. I said yes. He said no. Like trumps.

### ALL RIGHT

"I don't mind variations," she said, "but this feels wrong." I said, "It feels all right to me." She said, "To you, wrong is right." I said, "I didn't say right, I said all right." "Big difference," she said. I said, "Yes, I'm critical. My mind never stops. To me almost everything is always wrong. My standard is pleasure. To me, this is all right." She said, "To me it stinks." I said, "What do you like?" She said, "Like I don't like. I'm not interested in being superior to my sensations. I won't live long enough for all right."

### MA

I said, "Ma, do you know what happened?" She said, "Oh, my God."

LEONARD MICHAELS *I Would Have Saved Them  
If I Could* (1975)

THE STRUCTURE of a narrative is like the framework of girders that holds up a modern high-rise building: you can't see it, but it determines the edifice's shape and character. The effects of a novel's structure, however, are experienced not in space but over time – often quite a long time. Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, for instance, which Coleridge thought had one of the three greatest plots in literature (the other two were both plays, *Oedipus Rex* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*), runs to nearly 900 pages in the Penguin edition. As previously noted (Section 36) it has 198 Chapters, divided into eighteen Books, the first six of which are set in the country, the next six on the road, and the final six in London. Exactly in the middle of the novel most of the major characters pass through the same inn, but without meeting in combinations which would bring the story to a premature conclusion. The novel is packed with surprises, enigmas and suspense, and ends with a classic Reversal and Discovery.

It is impossible to illustrate the operation of such a complex plot with a short quotation, but the work of the American writer Leonard Michaels, who writes some of the shortest stories I know, allows us to examine the process in microcosm. I have cheated a little in as much as the pieces reproduced here were not designed to stand entirely alone, but belong to a cluster of short narratives, collectively entitled "Eating Out", some of which are interrelated by being concerned with the same character or characters. "Ma", for instance, is one of a series of dialogue-stories about the narrator and his mother. The whole sequence amounts to more than the sum of its parts. Nevertheless, each part is a self-contained narrative, with its own title. Even out of context the meaning of "Ma" is clear enough: the Jewish mother always expects the worst. Perhaps this text hovers on the boundary between the story and the joke. But there is no generic ambiguity about "The Hand", which conforms to the classic notion of narrative unity. It has a beginning, a middle and an end as defined by Aristotle: a beginning is what requires nothing to precede it, an end is what requires nothing to follow it, and a middle needs something both before and after it.

The beginning of "The Hand" consists of its first three sen-

tences, describing the narrator's punishment of his son. We do not need to know what behaviour has provoked this act. The first sentence, "I smacked my little boy" establishes a familiar domestic context. The emphasis is all on the narrator's emotions. "My anger was powerful. Like justice." The verbless sentence is a kind of afterthought, justifying the relief of tension, the exercise of power.

The middle of the story describes the waning of the narrator's confidence in his own righteousness, and his attempt to justify his behaviour to his son. First there is a kind of psychosomatic symptom: "Then I discovered no feeling in the hand." The hand is both a synecdoche and a metaphor for the "unfeeling" parent. "I said, 'Listen, I want to explain the complexities to you.'" Structurally, the whole story turns on the axis of this line, the only direct speech in it. Formally it favours the narrator, because direct speech always conveys a stronger sense of the speaker's presence than reported speech. But the use of the adult word, "complexities", to a little boy gives the game away. In spite of his professed anxiety to communicate with his son ("I spoke with seriousness and care, particularly of fathers") the narrator is wrestling with his own conscience.

The ending contains a neat double reversal. First, the little boy proves to have a penetrating insight into his father's state of mind: "He asked me, when I finished, if I wanted him to forgive me." Secondly the normal power relations between father and son are reversed: "I said yes. He said no." The symmetry of these sentences echoes the symmetry of the plot. The narrator's "Like trumps" ruefully acknowledges defeat.

Plot has been defined by a modern disciple of Aristotle (R. S. Crane) as "a completed process of change". A good deal of modern fiction has, however, avoided the kind of closure implied in the word "completed" and has focused on states of being in which change is minimal. "All Right" is a case in point. It has a much more elusive narrative structure than "The Hand" – less obvious, less easy to follow, the divisions between beginning, middle, and end less certain. It uses techniques I discussed earlier under the headings of "Staying on the Surface" and "Implication", consisting almost entirely of dialogue, and withholding information about the

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characters' private thoughts and motives. We infer that the couple are engaged in some unconventional sexual act, but it is impossible and unnecessary to know what exactly it is. The beginning perhaps consists of the woman's statement of her uneasiness; the middle of the narrator's self-justification and the woman's reiteration of her displeasure ("To me it stinks"); and the ending of her refusal to play the game of sexual dilettantism. But the story lacks the reassuring movement of "The Hand" towards the narrator's moment of truth. It is not clear why he is telling us this story, for he reports the woman's harsh strictures on him without comment. Whereas "The Hand" is instantly comprehensible, we have to re-read "All Right" several times to make sense of it, sounding the dialogue in our heads. ("She said, '*Like* I don't like . . . I won't live long enough for *all right*.'") The text seems to be about deadlock rather than discovery, and its unity owes more to its internal verbal echoes, especially of the word "right" highlighted in the title, than to its narrative structure. In that respect it offers itself as a kind of prose poem – either that, or a tantalizing fragment of some longer story.