

Gaps and Narrativity: Strategy and Function

This paper examines the notion of gaps in fictional narratives in relation to the concept of narrativity. As the primary texts for this analysis, I focus on two seemingly distant works, each representing distinct conventional and authorial 'worlds': Milan Kundera's *The Joke* and Franz Kafka's *The Castle*. By analysing the gaps in these texts and exploring their relationship to narrativity, the study proposes a classification of gaps and elucidates their respective functions within the semantic and narrative structures of both novels. "The radical gap is but one of numerous devices modern and postmodern texts display in their eagerness to lay bare the properties of fiction." (Pavel 1986, 108)

1. Introduction

Let us begin with the opening lines of two famous novels. In the opening passage of his first novel, *The Joke*, Milan Kundera (1982, 1) writes:

During those years, there was nothing to attract me to my hometown; I told myself that I had grown indifferent to it, which seemed natural: I had been away for fifteen years, had almost no friends or acquaintances left here (and wished to avoid the ones I did have), my mother was buried among strangers in a grave I had never tended. But I had been deceiving myself: what I had called indifference was in fact rancor; the reasons for it had escaped me, because here as elsewhere I had had both good and bad experiences, but the rancor was there, and it was this journey that had made me conscious of it: the *mission* that had brought me here could easily have been accomplished in Prague, after all, but I had suddenly begun to feel an irresistible attraction to the prospect of carrying it out here in my hometown precisely because this was a mission so cynical and low as to mock any suspicion that I was returning out of some maudlin attachment to things past.

Similarly, in one of the opening pages of *The Castle*, Franz Kafka (1945, 7f.) describes a scene in which his hero is appointed by the Castle as a land surveyor:

K. pricked up his ears. So the Castle had recognised him as the Land Surveyor. That was unpropitious for him, on the one hand, for it meant that the Castle was well informed about him, had estimated all the probable chances, and was taking up the challenge with a smile. On the other hand, however, it was quite propitious, for if his interpretation were right they underestimated his strength, and he would have more freedom of action than he had dared to hope. And if they expected to cow him by their lofty superiority in recognising him as Land Surveyor, they were mistaken; it made his skin prickle a little, that was all.

In the first quotation, "mission" is a word that is not only fundamental to the semantic structure of the novel but can also, by analogy, be considered crucial to the interpretation of the second quotation and of the novel as a whole. Moreover, the term enables us to interconnect the theoretical concepts of gaps and narrativity. Mission functions differently in the two cases: whereas in the former Ludvík explicitly refers to his return to his hometown as a mission, in the latter the mission is only implicitly present, perceived as the underlying motivation behind K.'s reasoning and emotional responses. At this early stage of reading, both missions appear 'uncertain.' This uncertainty can be regarded as crucial to the narrative and semantic construction of both novels. The introduction of a protagonist's mission that is initially acknowledged but not immediately specified

belongs to a set of classical narrative strategies and allows the authors to develop a plot that engages the reader. A traditional way of advancing such a plot involves the gradual revelation of this mission over the course of the novel.

2. Gaps and Missing Information

From a theoretical perspective, such an uncertain mission can be understood as a specific embodiment of missing information. Missing information, of course, is a fundamental component of any fictional narrative. In literary theory – both historically and in contemporary scholarship – this phenomenon has been described using a variety of terms, including ‘places of indeterminacy,’ ‘blanks,’ ‘blank or empty spaces,’ ‘implicit meaning,’ and ‘gaps.’ Among these, the notion of gaps has become the most frequently employed in literary-theoretical inquiry. It is used across a wide range of theoretical approaches and methodologies to denote different forms of missing or withheld information.¹ The notion of missing information will play a crucial role in our examination of the relationship between the concepts of gaps and narrativity.

Fictional worlds theory posits that gaps are inevitable and substantial components of fictional narratives due to the finite nature of their carriers. In addition to these ontological gaps, fictional narratives also contain gaps that are essential in a different sense, as they give rise to a specific form of aesthetic incompleteness – a crucial element of narrative semantics and aesthetics. If we set aside the ontological gaps, which are in principle unfillable, and focus instead on their aesthetic counterparts, we can distinguish two levels of aesthetic incompleteness. General aesthetic incompleteness is determined by genre-based aesthetic norms shared by readers and writers, whereas authorial aesthetic incompleteness stems from the distinctive stylistic choices and idiosyncrasies of individual authors. It should be emphasized that aesthetic gaps influence the semantic construction of fictional worlds and operate in conjunction with ontological gaps. From a narratological perspective, such gaps may be associated with any stratum or dimension of a narrative’s structure.

Aesthetic gaps influence the semantic design of fictional worlds and operate in conjunction with ontological gaps. Whereas ontological gaps are integral to the structure of a fictional world and, as such, cannot be eliminated or filled, aesthetic gaps depend on the specific semantic design of individual fictional works. The number and distribution of aesthetic gaps are determined both by general artistic conventions (‘conventional gaps’) and by the intentional, subjective choices of authors (‘auctorial gaps’).

Aesthetic gaps can be identified at various levels: they may arise from specific types of fictional worlds and their settings, stem from different conventional and/or authorial strategies, and ultimately play a wide range of roles in shaping a fictional world. These roles, in turn, influence how the world – together with the stories it contains – is received and conceptualized.

¹ When using the notion of gaps, scholars refer to permanent vs. temporary, ontological vs. aesthetic (Doležal 1998; Fořt 2018), conventional vs. auctorial, narrative (Gerrig 2010), temporary and permanent (Sternberg 1985), egregious (Abbott 2013), explanatory (Levine 1983), and other types of gaps.

3. Missing Information and Narrative Communication

In any case, gaps – whether ontological or aesthetic – originate from the same source: missing information. Only missing information at the level of the fictional text can give rise to semantic gaps, which may manifest at various levels of fictional narrative. Nevertheless, when discussing missing information in literary fiction, it is necessary to distinguish between two ways in which the effect of missing information can be produced: through information that is genuinely absent and through ‘interfering information.’ Interfering information typically consists of elements that are complex, seemingly random, circular, redundant, chaotic, unverifiable, or even contradictory; as a result, during the interpretive process it functions as if it were absent, contributing to the reader’s experience of an incomplete or incoherent narrative world.

From a communicative perspective, missing information plays a central role in fictional communication and in the creation and interpretation of narrative meaning. On the one hand, it serves as a powerful tool for maintaining the reader’s aesthetic and narrative engagement throughout the reading and comprehension of the text, drawing on both generic conventions and authorial strategies. On the other hand, missing information can also create significant challenges for the reader, potentially resulting in incomplete, fragmented, incoherent, or disintegrated fictional worlds.

4. Narrativity

So far, we have focused on the notion of gaps and their semantic contexts. However, to continue the analysis of the ‘missing mission’ passages introduced at the beginning of our study, we must make one more theoretical stop and turn our attention to the notion of narrativity. Like gaps, narrativity encompasses a relatively broad set of concepts that are mutually interconnected to varying degrees.² For the purposes of our analysis, however, this broad set must be narrowed to those concepts that treat narrativity as a quality that can, to some extent, be experienced as a form of quantity – not in the sense that we could precisely measure the narrative quality of a text, but rather in the sense that, in comparison, some texts display a greater capacity to “inspire narrative response” (Ryan 2005, 347) than others. At the same time, it must be emphasized that the notion of narrativity remains highly fluid, as it depends on both conventionally established criteria and subjective evaluations.³ In this view, in which narrativity is considered a variable quality or relative property of fictional narratives, sometimes notions as ‘decreased narrativity,’ ‘weak narrativity’ are employed to describe the possible quantifiability of the concept. For example, Marie-Laure Ryan (2007, 29f.) refers to a set of conditions, which are responsible for the decrease of narrativity: “static descriptions, descriptions of mental stages, recipes, and texts entirely made of advice, hypotheses, counterfactuals, and instructions.” Similarly, Brian McHale (2001, 165) connects lyrical

² When speaking about narratives in the most general theoretical framework it is impossible not to run into the concept of narrativity – the essential quality of narratives. Narrativity plays various conceptual roles, as the quality essential for the term can be detected in / connected with other terms and contexts, such as ‘narrativeness,’ ‘narrativehood,’ ‘narratibility,’ ‘tellability,’ ‘eventfulness,’ ‘emplotment,’ and ‘narrative’ itself. The term narrativity appears in various theoretical approaches with various meanings.

³ Prince (1999; narrativity as a scalar quality), Herman (2002; narrativity as scale of story-likeness), Fludernik (2003; narrativity is linked to human experience), Sternberg (1978; narrativity is linked to suspense, curiosity, surprise).

elements in narrative texts with a quality he assigns ‘weak narrativity’: “Weak narrativity involves, precisely, telling stories ‘poorly,’ distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminacy, in such a way as to *evoke* narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it.” Two points should be noted. First, if narrativity in some of its manifestations can be considered ‘decreased’ or ‘weak,’ in others it can be described as ‘increased,’ ‘enhanced,’ or ‘strong.’ Second, although concepts such as ‘decreased’ or ‘weak’ narrativity are commonly associated with particular narrative characteristics – including discourse and story-like qualities such as descriptiveness or incoherence –, I argue that linking narrativity in this quasi-quantitative model with the previously discussed concept of missing information can yield fruitful and more general insights. In this context, missing information emerges as the primary source of perceived incompleteness and incoherence, a principle that applies both to literary works as wholes and to individual narratives.

5. Mission Gaps

How, then, can the correlation between missing information and narrativity be described in more specific terms? At this point, it is useful to return to the two initial quotations. In both cases, the ‘missing mission’ information fundamentally shapes the narrative qualities of the texts.

In *The Joke*, Ludvík’s missing mission creates a gap with far-reaching consequences, not only for the global narrative and semantic structure of the novel but also for its narrative coherence and consistency. Filling this gap functions as an essential narrative principle, governing the kind and structure of motifs and themes as well as the techniques of their composition. The gradual and continuous filling of the gap is largely determined by the novel’s multi-voiced narration, which alternates perspectives across different narrative lines. This technique allows complementary and partially overlapping – but non-interfering – information to fill particular parts of the gap.

Moreover, this sophisticated and conventional strategy of filling the mission gap also addresses another classical narrative gap: that of character motivation. Conceptualizing characters and their inner purposiveness alongside their actions represents a crucial component of narrative and semantic coherence in fictional works. In the case of *The Joke*, this process not only guides readers through the plot but also illuminates the novel’s central narrative principle: the tension between large and small histories, totality and freedom, politics and erotics. In this way, the slow and deliberate filling of the gap directly enhances narrativity, employing classical narrative techniques to achieve classical aesthetic and semantic effects.

Turning now to the quotation from *The Castle*, it is helpful to first consider the broader semantic context of the passage. Unlike the first quotation, this excerpt does not come from the very beginning of the novel; it appears early in the narrative, describing a specific plot situation. The passage presents an inner monologue in K.’s mind at the moment when, after arriving in the village and facing the villagers’ strong suspicion, he finally introduces himself as a land surveyor. This statement is communicated by phone to the Castle and, after a short delay, confirmed by its authorities. It is difficult not to detect traces of both surprise at being accepted by the Castle and determination to challenge it. However, the purpose of his “mission” remains unrevealed.

Similar to *The Joke*, this ‘missing mission’ information plays a significant role in the novel’s global structure and construction, substantially shaping its semantic and narrative strategies. Nevertheless, unlike in *The Joke*, in *The Castle* the gap created by the missing mission not only distorts the conventionally expected narrative schema – where a gap is typically filled by additional information – but, more importantly, it initiates a chain of substantial gaps directly linked to K.’s purpose. The fact that this gap is never filled contributes to the global gap structure of the novel and ultimately results in a profound disruption of overall narrative coherence.

Regarding K., the missing mission gap also intensifies the character-motivation gap, one of the most significant types of missing-information gaps. Together with K.’s uncertain identity (e.g., only an initial, no origin or history), his lack of psychologization, and his seemingly aleatory actions, this uncertain mission purpose diminishes comprehensibility and reduces narrativity. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the missing mission gap can still function effectively within a specific gap context, which amplifies its narrative power and effect. This context arises from the interaction of various complementary narrative tools and strategies.

First of all, the most significant aspect of this context is the essential fact that *The Castle* represents one of the most famous unfinished novels in literary history. This unfinished nature generates fundamental semantic incoherence and narrative fragmentation. The incompleteness of the novel, along with the uncertainty of its intended layout, constitutes a major global phenomenon that shapes the discourse and semantic strategies employed in the text.

This global gap structure is reinforced by the hybrid nature of the fictional world. In this hybrid world, islands of the supernatural are interspersed within the natural domain without firm boundaries separating them. The coexistence of physically possible and physically impossible entities – whether characters or events – is a defining characteristic. Because there is no distinct supernatural domain, physically impossible events cannot be interpreted as miraculous interventions.

Hybrid worlds impose specific constraints on characters: in *The Castle*, the world is experienced, described, and interpreted by its inhabitants through particular hypotheses, which draw on three sources – myth, social experience, and personal experience. These sources often provide competing information. Unable to resolve these conflicts, the villagers process information in a chaotic, dialectical manner, accumulating alternating, shifting, and contradictory pieces of information. In practice, any attempt to answer a question leads to forking reasoning, in which all possibilities derived from the three sources are simultaneously evaluated and contradicted. Decisions that are ultimately made appear only loosely connected to this reasoning and often seem aleatory.

This interference between the characters’ available information and their reasoning profoundly affects the reader’s understanding of their motivations, rendering them complex, uncertain, and largely incomprehensible. Consequently, characters – epistemically alien within this hybrid world – cannot fully understand each other, and readers themselves are positioned as narrative aliens, inhabiting fragmented and incoherent parts of the narrative world(s).

6. Conclusion

To summarize, in Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*, the missing information concerning the details of Ludvík’s mission serves to enhance narrativity, as it is gradually revealed throughout the

development of the plot – also supported by the collage-like technique of poly-narration – culminating in the novel's specific ending. In contrast, in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, the missing information not only remains unfulfilled but is effectively 'replaced' by a series of interfering details arising from the protagonist's reasoning and actions. Consequently, this information disrupts the dimension of the character that grounds his motivation, producing significant effects on the causal structure of the narrative and, in turn, on its comprehensibility. This distortion can be interpreted as a decrease in narrativity, resulting from the specific formal and semantic strategies employed in the novel.

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