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Cliffhangers and Sequels: Stories, Serials, and Authorial Intentions

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ABSTRACT: A fictional work contains a cliffhanger if it ends with a central character finding herself in perilous circumstances. The goal of this paper is to establish that authors' narrative intentions determine what happens next in works that end in cliffhangers when no sequel is produced. To this end, I argue from the fact that a sequel written by the original author would uniquely resolve a fictional work that ends in a cliffhanger to the conclusion that the author's narrative intentions serve as truth-makers for claims about what happens next in the absence of some such sequel.

RÉSUMÉ : Une œuvre de fiction contient une mise en suspens (cliffhanger) si elle se termine au moment où un personnage central se retrouve dans des circonstances périlleuses. Le but de cet article est d'établir que les intentions narratives des auteurs déterminent ce qui se passe ensuite dans les œuvres qui se terminent par des mises en suspens et pour lesquelles aucune suite n'est produite. À cette fin, j'argumente à partir de l'idée qu'une suite écrite par l'auteur original résoudrait de façon unique une œuvre de fiction qui aboutit à une mise en suspens; je conclus que les intentions narratives de l'auteur servent de vérificateur pour des affirmations sur ce qui arrive ensuite en l'absence d'une telle suite.

Keywords: fiction, interpretation, stories, intentions, cliffhangers, sequels

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Cliffhangers are a common plot device in works of narrative fiction. A work—or one of its constituent chapters—contains a cliffhanger if it ends with a central character finding herself in perilous circumstances or, perhaps, discovering shocking information. Well-known examples include *The Two Towers* which ends with Sam's realization that Frodo is not dead but, rather, alive and a prisoner of the orcs in Cirith Ungol, as well as the second season finale of the television series *Dallas* which ends with J.R. Ewing being shot by an unknown assailant. Cliffhangers frequently occur in serialized fiction and are typically designed to entice appreciators to read or view subsequent works in the series in which they are resolved. But some cliffhangers remain unresolved, either because they occur in self-standing works of fiction, which are not part of a series, or because no sequel is ever produced. Cancelled TV series often result in unresolved cliffhangers. The central question of this essay is whether there can nevertheless be a fact of the matter about how things turn out in a work of fiction that ends in an unresolved cliffhanger.

The more general question at issue is the role of authorial intentions in story apprehension: the retrieval of story content through engagement with works of narrative fiction. And what if any role they have is a matter of some controversy. On the one hand, since fictional works are largely the product of the intentions of the authors who create them, these intentions seem clearly relevant to the stories they contain. But, on the other hand, extra-textual evidence of the intentions, there and then, of authors composing fictional works is widely ignored by appreciators, here and now, attempting to understand them. My hope is that coming to grips with the role of intentions in the determination of how things turn out in works ending in unresolved cliffhangers will yield insight into this more general question.

1. Stories and their Apprehension

The focus of this paper is on the apprehension of stories by means of engagement with works of narrative fiction. Story apprehension can be viewed as a species of interpretation. There are two characteristic features of this type of interpretation. First, it is realist in the sense that it assumes that works have interpretation-independent contents that can be retrieved by means of interpreting them, as opposed to having contents that are instead generated by the process of interpretation. And, second, it is focused on the story or narrative contents of the works towards which it is directed; other dimensions of meaning are of concern only to the extent to which they contribute to story contents. Works of narrative fiction are, of course, meaningful in a number of senses: they have morals and themes and make allusions to various things, and the sentences that make them up have literal and metaphorical and ironic meanings. But in story apprehension the fundamental concern is with what happens in the story generated by the work. Story apprehension is the primary approach to interpretation adopted by appreciators of non-literary genre fiction.

It is worth emphasizing that story apprehension does not merely consist in developing a theory of the story content of a work by any available means. Someone who learns what happens in *Great Expectations* by reading Cliffs

Notes has not apprehended the story in the relevant sense. Story apprehension consists in uncovering the story content of a fictional work by reading or watching it in an imaginatively engaged manner. Following Kendall Walton, we might say that this involves using the work in question as a prop in a game of make-believe, where what an appreciator imagines about what happens in the story—and when she imagines it—is determined by the rules governing the game she is playing.¹ So, for example, if the rules governing a game of make-believe played with a novel prescribe imagining of it that it is a report of actual events and prescribe imagining the events described in it in the order in which the event-descriptions occur in the text, then apprehending the story consists of imagining these events in this order and perhaps going on to developing a theory of the story content of the work on this basis.

Finally, a distinction needs to be drawn between narratives and stories. In a thin sense, for a work of fiction to contain a narrative—to have narrative content—is for it to contain one or more event-descriptions, that is, for it to contain representations of events or happenings. In a thicker sense, one might insist additionally that the events are represented as occurring in a certain temporal order, that the same subjects recur in them, or that they are represented as standing in certain sorts of causal relations to one another.² But the central concern here is with stories, not narratives. And what is important to note is that containing a narrative even in a thick sense is not sufficient for a fictional work to contain a story. What is required in addition is that the event-descriptions generate a narrative arc. Among other things, what this necessitates is that, unlike a narrative, a story must progress towards a conclusion.³ More generally, a story paradigmatically consists of the representation of a structure of events beginning with the introduction of characters and their circumstances, followed by the occurrence of various sorts of difficulties and complications for those characters leading to a climax or turning point, and concluding with some kind of resolution. And, as should be clear, not all narratives have this kind of structure: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a familiar example.

2. Stories and Sequels

The goal of this section is to establish that in self-standing works of narrative fiction that contain fragments of stories—rather than complete stories—how things turn out in the story is determined by what happens in authorized sequels to those works. By a ‘self-standing’ work of narrative fiction, I have in mind things like novels, films, and performances of plays. To characterize such

¹ Walton, 1990.

² Carroll, 2001. Strictly speaking, Carroll is concerned with analyzing the narrative connection rather than articulating what is required for a discourse to be or to contain a narrative.

³ Velleman, 2003, p. 10.

works as self-standing is to contrast them with their constituent parts: their chapters, or scenes, or acts. Of course, just as the chapters of a novel can generate an overarching story, so too can the novels in a series. And so a question that arises is in what sense a novel that is part of a series is self-standing but a chapter that is part of a novel is not. Although I do not mean to defend an answer to this question here—and nothing in my argument depends on my doing so—my inclination is to suppose that the distinction is found in how the material is presented to an appreciating audience: chapters are presented to audiences only as parts of novels, but novels in a series are each presented to the audience independently, separately from the rest.⁴

To say that a self-standing work of narrative fiction contains a fragment of a story is to say that the event-descriptions it contains generate part of a narrative arc but not the entirety of one. The narrative content of a work might, for example, just constitute the introductory stages of a narrative arc without including any of the subsequent story elements. Or it might just consist of the resolution of a narrative arc without including any of the preceding elements. Our concern here, in particular, is with works that end in cliffhangers, that is, with works whose narrative contents leave off just at, or just after, the climax of a narrative arc, before the central difficulties besetting the protagonist or protagonists have been resolved. One might, of course, worry whether narrative arcs are holistic in the sense that, for example, a collections of event-descriptions generate a climax only when succeeded by event-descriptions that generate a resolution and *vice versa*. And, if this were right, then it wouldn't make sense to talk of works that generate fragments of stories, but only of works whose narrative contents do not in part or in whole constitute stories. But I take it that the fact that readers are able to reliably recognize story fragments as such—when a work has ended in a cliffhanger, for example—suggests that story-structure is not entirely holistic in this sense.

What I want to argue here is that, insofar as a work that ends in cliffhanger has an authorized sequel, the narrative content of that sequel determines how things turn out, or are resolved, in the story that began in the original work. The sequel must be authorized because in principle more or less anyone can create a sequel to a given work of narrative fiction; all one needs is the wherewithal to produce a work of the relevant kind and 'story continuation' intentions directed towards the original. But it is not true that any given sequel determines how the cliffhanger in the original is resolved. In the normal case, in order to count as 'authorized,' the sequel has to be created by the author of the original. But, in some cases, if the original author has died or was a hired hand commissioned by the copyright holder, for example, someone other than the original author can create the authorized sequel. For present purposes, however, I am going to assume that the authorized sequels at issue are produced by the original authors.

⁴ Of course, novels published in serialized instalments pose difficulties for such approaches.

Now I do not mean to argue here that there is any substantial sense in which appreciators must or should look to authorized sequels to discern how things turn out in works that end in cliffhangers, rather than looking to unauthorized sequels or elsewhere, only that they do largely look to authorized sequels. One might, of course, attempt to come up with some such argument by appeal to certain sorts of natural proprietary rights on the part of the author of the original work over the characters or the fictional world or the story fragments she has created. But the prospects of any such argument strike me as unpromising. Even if authors have proprietary rights of this kind, it is unclear how they would be violated if certain appreciators looked to sequels penned by someone else for resolutions to cliffhangers. After all, their so doing would not prevent other appreciators from looking to authors' own sequels for resolutions. What I do mean to argue, however, is that taking authorized sequels to provide the unique resolutions to cliffhangers is a genuine but contingent aspect of the practice of story apprehension. Although appreciators could have engaged in a practice in which they appeal to unauthorized sequels to determine how things turn out in works that end in cliffhangers, the practice in which they in fact engage is one in which they look to authorized sequels. And the evidence that this is the story apprehension practice in which appreciators overwhelmingly engage is the fact of there being a huge market for serialized fiction. Millions and millions of people read serialized fiction and in so doing rely on authorized sequels to find out how things turn out in stories begun in previous works in their favourite series. They might not have, but they do.

3. Stories without Sequels

As we have seen, if there is an authorized sequel to a work that ends in a cliffhanger, it is part of our story apprehension practice that this sequel determines how things turn out in the story. But what if there is no authorized sequel? There are two cases. First, the author might consider the work complete despite ending in a cliffhanger; that is, it might be part of the authorial design of the work that the narrative content is a story fragment rather than a complete story. The television series *The Sopranos* is a well-known example of a work of this kind. And, in my view, in a case of this kind nothing determines how things turn out; there is simply no fact of the matter. Second, the author might consider the work incomplete—that is, that it is designed to be a fragment of a complete story—but, for whatever reason, the author never produces a sequel in which the story is completed. And what I want to argue here is that in such circumstances the story intentions of the original author determine how things turn out.⁵ For now I am going to assume that the author of the original work has sufficiently rich story intentions regarding an intended sequel to resolve the cliffhanger with which the work ended. What happens if she lacks such intentions will be considered in the next section.

⁵ I am, of course, simply assuming that whether a work, whose narrative content is a story fragment, is complete is a matter of authorial intention.

The basic argument I am going to defend here goes as follows:

1. If there were a sequel produced by the original author, it would determine how things turn out in the story begun in the original work.
2. If 1, then the original author's narrative intentions in fact determine what happens next.
- C. The original author's narrative intentions in fact determine what how things turn out in the story begun in the original work.

The argument as formulated is clearly valid. The question, of course, is whether the premises are true or, more modestly, defensible. I will consider each of them in turn.

Consider, first, premise 1. The first thing to note is that this is a counterfactual conditional. Although there are a number of competing accounts of the truth conditions of counterfactuals, for the most part they share the following idea: the truth of a counterfactual depends on whether its consequent is (or would be) true in circumstances as much like actuality as is compatible with the truth of its antecedent. Consider, for example, the following counterfactual:

If Peter Alward were six inches taller he would be playing basketball in the NBA.

In circumstances in which I was six inches taller but nearly everything else about me and my context was the same, I would retain my overall lack of athleticism, my weak basketball skills, and my poor conditioning. And in such circumstances I would have little prospect of playing in the NBA, despite my increased height. As a result, this counterfactual is false. In the case at hand, we are being asked to consider circumstances as much like actuality as is compatible with the fact that the author of the original has produced a sequel. And what is important to note is that the general practice of story apprehension would remain unchanged in such circumstances. After all, the fact of a single author writing one more novel is likely to have virtually no impact on a practice as widespread and well established as that of story apprehension. As a result, appreciators would look to authorized sequels to uncover how things turn out in works ending in cliffhangers, just as they actually do. As a result, the consequent of premise 1 would be true in such circumstances, making premise 1 in fact true.

Consider, now, premise 2. Recall: we are assuming here that the author of the original work in fact has sufficiently rich story intentions regarding an intended sequel in order to resolve the story begun in that work. The case for premise 2 consists of two central claims: first, the author's actual story intentions coincide with (or are included among) the story intentions she would have in counterfactual circumstances in which she produced a sequel; and, second, the story contents of the sequel she would produce in such circumstances coincide with the contents of her story intentions in the same circumstances.

I will consider each in turn. First, there are, of course, lots of possible circumstances in which an author of a work actually lacking a sequel produces a sequel while having any number of different story intentions. But typically those circumstances involve greater dissimilarities from actuality than circumstances in which her hypothetical story intentions are the same as her actual story intentions. After all, they involve the author, for some reason or other, changing her mind about how things turn out in her story. Second, authors design their works so that they will be interpreted by their intended audiences as having the contents they intend them to have. In the case at hand, this means that authors design their works so that the stories apprehended by readers coincide with the authors' own story intentions. Of course, it is possible that their design intentions will be unsuccessful, that the stories apprehended by readers will diverge from or contravene their story intentions. But this typically involves possible circumstances in which something has gone wrong. And circumstances in which something has gone wrong involve greater dissimilarities from actuality than circumstances in which an author's story intentions are successfully realized. Finally, since the author's actual story intentions coincide with the story content that would determine how things turn out in a story if a sequel were produced, they in fact determine how things turn out in the actual absence of a sequel.

4. Objections and Replies

There are, of course, a number of objections one might have to the argument presented here. Premise 1, I take it, is fairly uncontroversial. And, as noted above, the argument is clearly valid. As a result, the focus of the discussion here will be on premise 2. Now one preliminary question that might be raised concerns cases in which the author of a work that ends in a cliffhanger (and who considers the work incomplete but never produces a sequel) lacks story intentions sufficiently rich to resolve the cliffhanger. And, on the view on offer here, in such cases there is no fact of the matter about how things turn out: if no sequel determines how the cliffhanger is resolved and the author's story intentions fail to do so either, then nothing determines this. Unsatisfied appreciators might, of course, look to other fictional works the author has written to discover story-telling patterns or the like; but this would at best enable them to surmise how the story might have turned out, not how it did.

One objection might involve pointing out that the argument underestimates the propensity of authors to fail in their story-design intentions. Authors frequently produce works for which stories apprehended by readers deviate from the authors' own story intentions. As a result, it is not in general true that, if a sequel were produced, its story content would coincide with the author's story intentions. The trouble with this objection is that it assumes that in many cases failures of story-design intentions are more likely than not, that it is frequently true that, if an author were to produce a work for which she has story-design intentions, those intentions would be frustrated. But in the case of most

competent authors this is just backwards: it is more likely that their intentions will be satisfied than frustrated. Of course, sometimes things go wrong, and authors produce stories that just don't read as they intended. But normally this requires a special explanation about what went wrong and why. And, insofar as our concern is with circumstances as much like reality but for the author's having produced the work in question, such special explanations are unlikely to be relevant. I will, however, concede that in cases in which the author is incompetent, and can be expected to produce a work in which her design intentions are frustrated, my argument does not apply and the author's story intentions do not determine how things turn out in lieu of a sequel.

A second objection might involve noting that authors' story intentions frequently evolve through the writing process of writing; that is, even when an author starts out with a well-developed plan about how the story she intends to write is going to go, that plan frequently changes—often substantially—by the time she has finished writing. As a result, even if the story content of a completed work coincides with the author's story intentions at the end of the compositional process, it may deviate considerably from the author's story intentions at the start of the process. And it is the latter that (arguably) coincide with an author's story intentions in the absence of a sequel, not the former. Although it is true that authors' story intentions do often evolve during the compositional process, it is worth emphasizing that, first, typically the more well-worked out the author's plan is at the outset, the less it evolves through the process and, second, the plan regarding how a cliffhanger is resolved is typically more fixed than other elements of the author's story intentions. Moreover, in the kind of case under consideration in which the original work has already been published, there is less flexibility for tinkering with the planned resolution of the cliffhanger; after all, the author has little option to go back and revise the set up in order to make it commensurable with a different ending. As a result, although the objection may show that that the conclusion of the argument on offer here is not fully general, there are grounds for thinking it applies widely enough to be of interest.

Finally, one might worry whether the putative fact that an author's actual story intentions coincide with the story content that would determine how things turn out in a story were a sequel produced suffices to establish that the author's actual intentions determine how things turn out if no sequel is produced. In the counterfactual circumstances at issue it is because the story content in question is the content of an authorized sequel that makes it the determinant of how the cliffhanger in the original work is resolved. And it is simply unclear why the fact that the author's psychological states share this content should give them this same determining role in circumstances in which they don't culminate in a sequel. The answer to this worry, however, is to be found in the practice of story apprehension. As noted above, readers overwhelmingly look to sequels penned by the author of the original work to find out how things turn out, rather than looking to sequels penned by someone else or working out

their own resolutions to the cliffhanger. This suggests that, as part of the story apprehension practice, readers grant the original author the authority to determine how things turn out. And the author possesses this authority whether or not she goes on to produce a sequel. As a result, as long as her decisions about how things turn out in the story coincide with the content a sequel would have had were she to have written one, those decisions in fact determine how things turn out.

5. Implications and Conclusions

The conclusion of the argument on offer here can be summed up as follows: in a broad range of cases in which a fictional work ends in a cliffhanger but no sequel is ever produced, the resolution of the cliffhanger can be found in the author's story intentions. And this might seem to be little more than a curiosity, offering no genuine insight into story apprehension, or interpretation more generally. One might, of course, argue that this conclusion counts in favour of some kind of intentionalist theory of interpretation, according to which an author's story intentions play a central role in generating a theory of the meaning or content of a work.⁶ A theory of interpretation, however, is a theory of how one ought to go about generating an account of the meaning of a text, but in the cases at issue there is no text to interpret because the sequel has not been written. Drawing on evidence of an author's story intentions when there is no sequel is not interpreting a text, it is something one does instead of interpreting a text. It is more akin to finding out what happens in a story by reading Cliffs Notes than by apprehending the story in the sense at issue here.

Nevertheless the conclusion defended here might offer some insight into the more general question of the role of intentions in interpretation. The problem, as noted above, is the following: on the one hand, since fictional works are largely the products of the intentions of the authors who create them, these intentions seem clearly relevant to the stories they contain; but, on the other hand, typical readers of serialized fiction, at least, systematically ignore extra-textual evidence of authors' intentions in their apprehension of stories. In the cases under consideration here, authors' intentions play no role in story apprehension either; rather, they serve as a criterion of correctness for judgements regarding what happens in the story in the absence of a text. And what I want to suggest is that they can serve this role more generally as a criterion of successful story apprehension. One might endorse a variant of strong intentionalism and take conformity to authors' intentions to be the sole criterion of success, or endorse a variant of moderate intentionalism and take them to come into play only to resolve genuine ambiguities.⁷ But, either way, the relevance of authorial intentions to story apprehension is thereby secured in a manner that is compatible with the fact that they play no role in the process of story apprehension.

⁶ See, e.g., Hirsch, 1967; Stecker, 2006.

⁷ See, e.g., Hirsch, 1967, and Stecker, 2006, respectively.

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