THEORY AND INTERPRETATION OF NARRATIVE
James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, Series Editors
NARRATIVE STRUCTURES
and the
LANGUAGE OF THE SELF

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I dedicate this book to Reva Marin, artist and scholar, companion.
I. The Self and the Subject

My grandfather (my father told me) had twenty different business cards, for twenty different businesses, so he could adapt himself (his self) to almost any opportunity he might encounter. Perhaps it was this story which convinced me at an early age that the self is fluid, mutable, multiple.

When my grandfather pulled out one of his business cards, there was most likely a story to go along with it, a story to explain the self he was claiming to be. Literary stories also express versions of the self. This book is an exploration of some of the roles a self can take in literature—some of the modes of subjectivity. The characters brought together in a narrative, I assume, are not random collections but structured sets, and these sets correspond to various manifestations of the self. Much of my argument tries to demonstrate the shape and structure of these narrative sets.

Probably every narrative must have some underlying concept of the self and subjectivity, but these concepts are not always thematized. My project concerns only those narratives in which the question of the self matters—but this is quite a large group; as I have worked through the exploration, I have continually been surprised to discover applications where I did not expect them. Investigation of the self turns out to be a major project of the Western narrative tradition. My hope is that the tools, terms, and techniques I present will illuminate works of this kind. In addition, I hope to show that concepts of the self based on the binary opposition of subject and object are unable to account for the various kinds of subjectivity expressed in narrative. I do not
propose a complete theory of the self and subjectivity, and I am not sure that such a complete theory is possible. I will be content if this study can lead to an increased awareness of the complexity of the self and of stories about the self.

Two concepts, then, are basic to the discussion: the *self* and the *subject*. Both are notoriously difficult. The self, as I understand it, is related to a certain feeling of identity; but this formulation is hardly a definition. Every discussion must start somewhere, with some term that is left undefined; I begin this exploration without defining the self, but by the end of the discussion my own sense of the self will be reasonably clear. A few initial comments, however, are in order.

I am sympathetic to the idea that the self has developed through the ordinary process of Darwinian evolution, perhaps as a way of organizing increasingly complex behaviors—but I am not expert in this area, and I would not want to make dogmatic assertions.\(^1\) Furthermore, the self seems to be connected in some way to memory and responsibility. What you remember belongs to your self; the memories of another person are not directly part of your self, though they may become so through learning. On the other hand, there are things you have done and things that have happened to you that you do not remember, and nonetheless these may be part of your self.

You cannot rightly be held directly responsible for the actions of another self. If I rob a bank, you should not be punished. (I pass over the hidden or shared responsibility of such figures as crime bosses and editors.) On the other hand, we do not always consider people responsible for their actions. If you are insane, if you are not yourself, you may be judged not guilty of murder, even if you were the killer.

The word “subject” has a variety of meanings—eighteen, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In this book I am primarily interested in four kinds of subject: the grammatical subject, the logical subject, the psychological subject, and the subject of narrative. None of these is exactly the same as any of the others, and yet our conception of each is to some extent influenced by the others.

The grammatical subject combines several different functions. In the major European languages the subject can be the topic of a statement, it can be the agent of an action, or it can be the noun with which the verb agrees. Different languages have different ways of marking the subject, and some languages may not have subjects at all.

The logical subject is that which has attributes, that about which some-
thing can be said. The subject of a logical proposition is most likely also the grammatical subject of a sentence, just as the Cartesian subject, the *I* of “I think, therefore I am,” is also a grammatical subject.

The psychological subject is the center of consciousness, the center of voluntary action, and perhaps the center of the unconscious self as well. The Cartesian *I* is a subject not only in logic but also in psychology. This psychological subject is opposed to the object, which is anything presented to the consciousness of the subject.

The subject of narrative is any character who is centrally involved in a story. A story may have one subject or several. These stories may be literary, or they may be the stories you tell yourself about yourself. The narrative subject is likely to be the topic of statements, it is likely to have attributes, and it is likely to be the center of action and experience.

A narrative subject can appear in various roles, such as the role of the agent—the self which acts—or the role of the patient—the self which is acted upon—and so on. Thus a narrative subject, as I understand it, is the role taken on by a self in a story. This definition can be generalized: the subject is the self in a role, and the self becomes a subject when it plays a role. Self here is the more general concept, whereas subjects are more particular. Subject roles can be interpersonal—for instance, one person observing another (“I” and “thee”)—but they can also be intrapersonal—the observer and the observed within the divided Cartesian self (“I” and “me”). I would be willing to say that a self is what all subjects have in common, as long as we remember that what all doughnuts have in common is a hole. The reader will notice that Part One of this study tends to speak of the self, particularly in the examination of the various models of the self presented by Descartes, Hegel, Plato, Freud, and Mead, while Part Two tends to speak of various subjectivities as manifestations of the self.

A self in a story may take on different subject roles at different times, and perhaps even different roles at the same time. Thus even if one believes in a unitary self, subjectivity is various. The quality of a role is that role’s subjectivity: agent subjectivity, patient subjectivity, and so on. The narrative subject is at the center of my discussion, but clearly the meaning of this subject borrows from the other meanings of the word; and because all four types are linked, whatever we can conclude about this narrative subject will also apply in some measure to the other kinds of subject.

My method throughout is to use brief theoretical accounts as a basis for concrete interpretations of specific narratives. In Part One, “Philosophical Fables of the Self,” I examine versions of the self presented by Descartes, Hegel, Freud, and Mead. Chapter 1 deals with Descartes’ concept of the single reflexive self. Descartes’ concept of the subject turns out to be very much
like the subject in Montaigne and other reflexive writers, and these are the topic of chapter 2.

Descartes’ self is essentially solitary, even in company, but Hegel’s Dialectic of the Master and the Slave introduces an essential second self: in this philosophic fable, self-consciousness can arise only when two consciousnesses confront each other. Aristophanes (as depicted in Plato’s *Symposium*) suggests that the relationship between two selves can be erotic rather than hostile. I discuss these fables in chapter 3, and in chapter 4 I use the Hegelian/Aristophanic model to examine narratives in which the self is doubled. When two selves begin to move apart, a space opens for a third character. Chapter 5 adapts a Freudian myth to examine this narrative third, and ends with Mead’s model of the social self.

Part Two, “The Case of the Subject,” extends the discussion to other roles of the self, to other kinds of subjectivity. In a sense, these roles of the self; these modes of subjectivity, develop Mead’s social self through concepts derived from Case Grammar in linguistics: these concepts are explained in chapter 6, which serves as an introduction to Part Two. Chapter 7 deals with the linguistic functions of the agent, patient, and experiencer and applies this model to narratives of agency, patience, and experience. Chapter 8 explores the dative of interest, the subject as witness. Chapters 9 and 10 are concerned with the instrumental subject and the locative subject. The Conclusion draws together the various discussions into a coherent, if incomplete, account of the self and some of the roles of the self in narrative.

The result of the discussion is thus a complex field of subject positions in narrative, including self-reflexive Cartesian subjects; Hegelian double subjects; subjects of the Freudian third; agents, patients, and experiencers; witnesses; instrumental subjects; and locative subjects. Each of these is a way of being a self, and any theory of the self or the subject must include at least these positions—though the possibility of further elaboration is not excluded.

This field of subject positions helps to illuminate a central project of the Western narrative tradition, but it also reflects a reality of our lives. At any moment anyone is likely to be taking on some one (or perhaps more than one) of these positions. If a part of the function of literature is to help us understand ourselves, then an analysis of the self in literature is fundamental.

II. The Subject and Narrative

This study is concerned with the varieties of subjectivity, but it is equally
concerned with narrative, since the self becomes a subject only by playing a role in a story. In other words, I am interested in both character and plot and in the interrelationship of the two. I do not agree with Aristotle that action trumps character, or with E. M. Forster that character trumps plot, but rather with Henry James, who asks, “What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?”

The study of character and plot goes back at least as far as Aristotle’s *Poetics*, but modern narratological approaches begin with Vladimir Propp’s seminal study, *The Morphology of the Folktale*. Propp offers a grammar of the Russian folktale, consisting of a sequence of thirty-odd events, such as “One of the Members of a Family Absents Himself from Home,” “An Interdiction is Addressed to the Hero,” “The Interdiction is Violated,” and so on, until the final events, “The Villain is Punished” and “The Hero is Married and Ascends the Throne.” Not all of these events have to be present in any one tale, but those that do occur must occur in fixed order, and these thirty-odd events form the entire repertoire of events in the genre.

Propp’s grammar has proved too specific to be directly adaptable to other narrative genres, and many of the more recent models of narrative grammar have sacrificed specificity in order to gain generality. Claude Bremond has proposed a system of “elementary sequences” with three obligatory phases: the event that opens the process, the event that realizes the process, and the event that closes the process. In any extended narrative there will be a number of elementary sequences combined in various ways. In Thomas Pavel’s modification of Bremond’s system, a “move” consists of a “problem,” a “solution,” and perhaps also an “auxiliary” through which the solution is achieved. More recently, Emma Kafalenos has proposed a system with five key moments and five subsidiary moments. The five key moments are (A), a destabilizing event; (C), a decision by some character or group of characters to alleviate the destabilizing event; (C’), an initial action to alleviate the destabilizing event; (H), a primary action to alleviate the destabilizing event; and (I), the success or failure of the primary action to alleviate the destabilizing event. This system is fundamentally an elaboration of the three elements

6. See Kafalenos, p. 7. The subsidiary moments are (B), a request that someone alleviate A; (D), the alleviating character is tested; (E), the alleviating character responds to the test; (F),
in Bremond's and Pavel's systems. I will return to Kafalenos’s system in a moment.

The second aspect of Propp’s system is a set of “spheres of action,” that is, roles which are found in the Russian folktales. According to Propp, there are seven spheres of action (though a single sphere of action may be distributed among several characters, and a single character may manifest more than one sphere of action). These spheres of action are 1) the sphere of action of the villain; 2) the sphere of action of the donor; 3) the sphere of action of the helper; 4) the sphere of action of a princess (a sought-for person) and her father; 5) the sphere of action of the dispatcher; 6) the sphere of action of the hero; and 7) the sphere of action of the false hero. A. J. Greimas has proposed a system with six roles, called actants, divided into three sets of binary oppositions (again, a role may be divided among more than one character, and a character may manifest more than one role).7 The first set is the subject (corresponding to Propp’s hero) and the object (corresponding to Propp’s sought-for person). The second pair is the giver or sender (roughly corresponding to the father of the princess) and the receiver (roughly corresponding to Propp’s dispatcher). The third set is the helper (corresponding to Propp’s donor and helper) and the opponent (corresponding to Propp’s villain and false hero).8

Propp’s spheres of action and Greimas’s actants are in some ways similar to the narrative subjects discussed in this study, but they are also quite fundamentally different.9 Propp’s theory claims to account for all the characters in his genre, the Russian folktales, and Greimas’s theory claims to account generally for all of the possible characters in narrative. The system of narrative subjectivity that I present, on the other hand, is designed to account for only those narrative roles that achieve a certain level of narrative significance.10 On the other hand, my system of narrative subjectivity insists that any of the roles identified can become a center of subjectivity, whereas in the systems proposed by Propp and Greimas, the hero or the subject is clearly at

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7. See Greimas, Structural Semantics, chapter X, “Reflections on Actantial Models,” pp. 197–221; Greimas is committed to the kind of binary model of subject and object that I critique.
8. For a good summary of Propp, Greimas, and other theorists, see Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature, pp. 104–11; Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics, pp. 20–22 and 34–35; and David Herman, Story Logic, pp. 93–94, 121–27.
9. Kenneth Burke’s pentad (act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose) is in some ways closer to my system: see A Grammar of Motives, p. xv and passim.
10. The measurement of this significance is a matter of judgment, but for example this system does not account for characters who are merely narrative tools.
the center of the story, and the other roles are secondary. This concentration on the hero or the subject can also be found in the system proposed by Kafalenos, which I have discussed above. Her system is constructed around the character she calls the C-actant, that is, the character who decides to alleviate the destabilizing event. This character will by definition be an agent (though Kafalenos’s conception of agency is fairly broad). The central position Kafalenos grants to the C-actant perfectly suits her project, which is narrative causality, but it does not suit my project, which is narrative subjectivity.

In any action there may be a number of participants who take on different roles and different kinds of subjectivity. The number and the nature of the roles in a narrative constitute what I call narrative geometry (the term is introduced in chapter 3 and gradually elucidated throughout the book). The grouping of stories with similar narrative geometries produces interesting and sometimes surprising juxtapositions. But each narrative manifests its narrative geometry in its own way. A love triangle, for example, can be seen from the perspective of any of the three principals, or from the perspective of an onlooker (as in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby), or from the perspective of someone used by other characters (as in L. P. Hartley’s The Go-Between). The story, that is, the bare events, perhaps can be thought of independently of any particular role, but the plot, that is, the events as they are formed into a narrative, will privilege certain roles. Thus plots can be associated with any of the various roles I discuss—a Cartesian plot privileges a Cartesian subject, a Hegelian plot privileges Hegelian subjects, and so on. Most plots are to some extent mixed, but usually one kind of subjectivity dominates.

III. Narrative and Method

Narrative interpretation can be approached from two sides, the side of the storyteller and the side of the reader; these, of course, are reciprocal. On the one side, a storyteller presents an interpretation of some aspect of the world, real or imagined, and narrative as interpretation is a form of thought. In these terms the texts I discuss can be seen as presenting various narrative interpretations of what it is to be a self. On the other side, interpretation is something that readers or critics do to texts as they attempt to understand the interpretation of the world presented by the story.

For my purposes, narrative thought can be seen to present itself simultaneously in three aspects: the formal, the mimetic, and the thematic.11 The-

11. These distinctions can be related to James Phelan’s scheme of thematic, synthetic, and
mimetically, a work of literature may express some general idea or group of ideas; mimetically, it expresses these ideas through particular characters in particular situations; and formally, it communicates through a cultural code of narrative conventions.

On the other side, critical interpretation can also be formal, mimetic, or thematic, or all three at once. Much of the ordinary use of language is primarily thematic; the mimetic and formal aspects are present, but they function in service of the theme and they come to attention only when they are somehow problematic. Artistic language, however, tends to foreground the formal and the mimetic, to varying degrees. Thus an interpretation that is only thematic runs the risk of reducing the total meaning of the story. To paraphrase Robert Frost, narrative is what gets lost in thematic interpretation. If we were interested only in themes, we would not need stories. In these terms the themes I am interested in have to do with the nature of subjectivity; these themes are mimetically expressed through various stories that show various particular kinds of subjectivity; and these stories reflect formal conventions, such as the narrative geometries I describe in this study.

Literary interpretation often occurs at the level of the individual work, but groups of works may also be taken as an interpretive unit. For example, the story of Oedipus concerns a son who kills his father and marries his mother, whereas the story of Hippolytus concerns a (step)mother who falls in love with her (step)son, who is killed by the curse of his father. Orestes kills his mother to avenge her murder of his father, whereas Procne kills her son Itys to take revenge on her faithless husband Tereus. Oinomaos tries to keep his daughter Hippodameia for himself but is killed by his daughter’s suitor, Pelops, whereas Smyrna disguised herself in order to sleep with her father, who tried to kill her when he found out the truth. Taken together,
these stories reveal the ancient Greek fascination with the formal permutations of bad family relationships in a way that no single work could do. Likewise, Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea* shows one version of the subject, whereas Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae* shows another version, and L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between* shows still another version. These and all of the other stories discussed here taken together reveal a complex model of the self that cannot be derived from any narrative read on its own.

In the course of my exploration of narrative subjectivity, I have freely plundered some areas in which I am hardly expert—a little philosophy, a little psychoanalysis, and a good deal of linguistics. This plundering gives the project a somewhat digressive character, for which I do not apologize. What seems at first to be a digression will often return as a theme or a way of thinking at various points in the discussion. When I discuss a theory in linguistics or psychology or philosophy, I will almost never be interested in whether or not the theory is true; for example, I discuss Descartes’ concept of the subject at some length, not because I think it is true—or false—but because it provides one model of the self, the reflexive self, which is manifested in a set of narratives.

The method I use is heavily influenced by the study of language, but it is not structuralist, at least in the most common understanding of the term. I also do not associate myself with any particular school of post-structuralist thought. Structuralism tended toward binary analyses. I grant binaries where they seem appropriate, but phenomena often demand a richer analysis.15 In philosophy and also in casual discourse, subjectivity is most often seen as a binary phenomenon, as we see in the frequent dichotomy of subject and object or self and other. I believe that this binary division is inadequate; a more complex and subtle analysis of the self and subjectivity can be found in the narrative categories described here.

Structuralism was largely based on Saussure’s theory of the sign and Jakobson’s theory of phonology; the method used here is based on a post-Saussurian analysis of syntax and deep-structure semantic roles. Structuralism often claimed that all the structures of a cultural moment in some sense hang together. Social reality, however, seems to me complex and contested, and I do not believe that history always moves through sharp, epistemic ruptures. Structuralism aspired to be a science. Though I admire the achievements of science, I do not believe that science is the highest form of thought, and I do not claim any scientific status for this discussion.

15. The binarism of structuralism, however, has sometimes been exaggerated, since structuralism included such concepts as markedness, neutralization, and mediation, none of which is strictly binary.
My approach to linguistics is amateur and eclectic. I grew up in the great days of Chomsky’s revolution, but I have also read the work of many linguists who are not part of his school. My approach is most obviously indebted to Case Grammar and to Charles Fillmore’s “The Case for Case” in particular, but I also admire the work of Kenneth Pike, M. A. K. Halliday, Dwight Bolinger, Ronald Longacre, William Labov, and Talmy Givon, among others. Because the study of language is (perhaps) the most advanced of the human sciences, it may sometimes provide models for investigations in other areas. But each area is ultimately unique, and it is a mistake to assume that the structure of language is necessarily the structure of anything else.

Language can certainly be ambiguous, but I do not believe that there is an endless and uncontrollable slippage of the sign. I do believe in authors, and I believe that authors are responsible for what they write, though I also believe that the best evidence for the author’s intention is usually to be found in the text. Writers, like other users of language, may not be entirely aware of what they mean. I do not believe that language is isomorphic with the world, but I do believe that a theory of meaning must include a theory of reference, however complicated that may be. Moreover, any fundamental element of language is likely to express something about our way of being in the world. Language reflects society at a relatively superficial level—that is, mostly through vocabulary. The deeper structure of language is compatible with many quite different social structures, including those yet to exist. Some of the forms of subjectivity that I explore in this study seem to correlate with fundamental features of language; I do not claim, however, that the categories of narrative analysis must be the same as the categories of grammatical analysis.

In any case, the categories I suggest are not intended to exhaust the possible forms of subjectivity, though I believe that they apply to a large number of narratives. Additional categories may be suggested by other grammatical forms or by other fields. Once we move beyond the binary opposition of subject and object, subjectivity is potentially without limit, varying with every person in every situation. But we need some categories in order to grasp this profusion; which categories and how many we choose will depend on our needs. The kinds of subjectivity I have described account for a large and interesting group of narratives, and these narratives in turn describe the kinds of subjectivity of greatest interest to writers and readers.
In this study I have been concerned with the self and with narrative: the self in narrative and narratives of the self. In previous chapters I have described a set of modes of subjectivity—versions of the self—as they are found in narratives. I have argued that there are various ways of conceiving the self: the Cartesian self; the Hegelian self; the Freudian self; the self as agent, as patient, as experiencer, as witness; and even the self as instrument or as location.\(^1\) I have further argued that these various modes of subjectivity find their representation in narratives—sometimes in narratives written by philosophers, but more often and often more interestingly in narratives written by storytellers. In order to understand the self, we should look to these stories, and in order to understand these stories, we should think about the self.

The study of narrative demands a concept of the self richer than the nearly ubiquitous binary division of the self and the other, or the subject and the object. This dichotomous model has its uses in particular situations, but it does not provide a generally adequate account of the self. We must always ask: What kind of self? What kind of other?

\(^1\) But this list is hardly exhaustive. The locative case can also express location in time, and time can become a subject in novels of a year (such as *The Return of the Native*) or of a day (such as *Ulysses*). The abessive case, the case of lack, as in the form “money-less,” marks the subjectivity of quest stories. The translative case, which marks the end point of a state of change, might correspond to stories of transformation (such as *The Golden Ass*). The vocative case may be the case of interpellation, the subjectivity of the audience (as in *The Fall*). Modes of subjectivity may also be suggested by titles, such as *The Clown, The Rogue, The Confidence Man*, or even *The Man Without Qualities*.
I have organized the discussion of the narrative self around certain theoretical and philosophic models, but I do not believe that narratives are imperfect imitations of ideal theoretical forms. One might say instead that theoretical and philosophic models are imperfect abstractions of lived experience. Narrative, of course, is not lived experience, but rather a selection and ordering of the overwhelming abundance of life according to some plan for some purpose. Each selection and ordering amounts to a theory, though in the telling, the theory is usually better left implicit. Narrative thus sits between and mediates theory and experience, and it draws its particular strength from its participation in both. A narrative will use an implicit model to make sense of life, and it will show what it might feel like to live within some model.

So much I take to be a general claim about narrative. In the terms of this study, each narrative I have examined says: Here is what one particular way of being a self feels like. Here is the experience of one particular kind of subjectivity. Notes from Underground tells us what it might feel like to live as a Cartesian self, and so does The Talented Mr. Ripley, in a rather different way. A Farewell to Arms presents one possible life according to the Hegelian model, and A Separate Peace presents another. Moreover, all of these narratives taken together provide a complex vision of possible subjectivities, a theory of theories of the self.

This concluding chapter extends the discussion in two directions. The first section of the chapter presents an analysis of L. P. Hartley’s The Go-Between, which displays many modes of the self in a single story. Whereas each of the earlier chapters has concentrated on one dominant form of subjectivity, here I want to show the complex interactions among several different modes. This discussion of multiple subjectivities then leads into the second section, which is concerned with the nature of the self and the subject. This question again finds itself represented in narrative, in Ishiguro’s fable of the butler in The Remains of the Day and in Sartre’s fable of the waiter in Being and Nothingness.

L. P. Hartley’s The Go-Between is the story of a romantic triangle. It is also the story of a young boy observing a romantic triangle. And it is also the story of an old man remembering himself as a young boy observing a romantic triangle. The narrative moves from the outside in and then back out, though the boundaries of the narrative layers are not entirely firm.
The novel begins with a brief prologue, set in 1952. The narrator, Leo Colston, now in his sixties, has come across a diary he kept in the year 1900, when he was twelve and thirteen. He has suppressed many of his memories of that time in his life, but in unlocking the diary he unlocks the memories, and Leo's narrative of these recovered memories forms the long central section of the novel.

The diary itself is an important object in the story. Not only does it play a role in some of the events of the story, but it also provides an important set of symbols. The diary is decorated with the signs of the zodiac, and several of these become identified with characters in the story, as we will see below.

The old Leo who finds the diary and thereby remembers himself is sharply divided from the young Leo he remembers. As we saw in chapter 1, almost any self-reflexive memoir, fictional or nonfictional, will show some division of the self. In some reflexive narratives this division is small and unimportant, but in this novel the division is both extreme and an essential point of the story. There is, of course, a large temporal gap—over fifty years—between the two Leos, but more fundamentally the young Leo has been partly hidden from the old Leo, until he opens the diary and recovers his past. If memory is a part of what makes a self, then Leo's loss of memory is a loss of self.

The older Leo is very aware of this division. In the prologue he imagines a dialogue between himself in the present and the self he is now remembering:

If my twelve-year-old self, of whom I had grown rather fond, thinking about him, were to reproach me: "Why have you grown up such a dull dog, when I gave you such a good start? Why have you spent your time in dusty libraries, cataloguing other people's books instead of writing your own? . . ."

I should have an answer ready. "Well, it was you who let me down, and I will tell you how. You flew too near the sun, and you were scorched. This cindery creature is what you made me." (31–32)

This dialogue, which continues for about a page, clearly shows the division and even the conflict between Leo's two selves. This difference is maintained throughout the novel, as the old Leo in his narration often notes that he now understands what had been mysterious to him when he was a boy. Only at the end of the novel is there a sense that Leo's two selves have finally come together into a single person as he regains the memories of the summer of 1900.

Still in the prologue, before the long central section of the novel, Leo tells us about his troubles in boarding school in the months just before the main
story begins. Leo was a late-comer to school; his father, a bank manager, had wanted to educate him at home, but (as we learn in chapter 1) after his father died he was sent to school by his socially ambitious mother. We can easily imagine the complex feelings Leo has to deal with: the pain of his father's recent death, the fear that he is of a lower class than most of his schoolmates, his insecurity as a late arrival to the school. It's no wonder that he has to struggle to find his place.

This problem comes to a head when some of the other boys steal his diary—the same diary he will find in 1952—and read his rather pretentious entries. They ridicule and torment him, and in revenge he writes a formal curse in his diary. The boys also read this and torment him even more. But the next night the ringleaders, Jenkins and Strode, are badly injured when they fall off a roof. Leo gets a reputation for magical powers, which he himself more than half believes. He also gets an invitation to stay the summer with one of his schoolmates, Marcus Maudsley, at Brandham Hall, an estate near Norfolk. The events of Leo's summer at Brandham Hall form the central section of the novel, in twenty-three numbered chapters.

The preliminary story in the prologue introduces questions about Leo's social self. The social self, as G. H. Mead has told us, is defined by its relation to other selves, as the role of a player on an athletic team is defined by the roles of the other players. Every boarding school is a miniature society, and each boy has to find his place in that society. When we first see Leo, he is the object of torment and ridicule, a patient, but he becomes an agent through the seeming success of his curse. These questions of Leo's agency and his position in society are then developed in the central section of the novel.2

At Brandham Hall, Leo is a middle-class boy thrust among the upper classes, and the problem of his social self becomes if anything more acute. His friend Marcus has to give him instructions in proper behavior. Leo has brought only heavy clothing, but the weather has become very hot. He wonders if he should wear his cricket clothes, but Marcus firmly tells him that “only cads wear their school clothes in the holidays. It isn't done” (55). Marcus continues with his advice: “You oughtn't really to be wearing the school band round your hat, but I didn't say anything. And, Leo, you mustn't come down to breakfast in your slippers. It's the sort of thing bank clerks do.” (55). This comment cuts Leo: “I winced at the reference to bank clerks, and remembered that on Sunday my father had always come down to breakfast

2. In the epilogue, Leo explicitly marks the connection between the events at school and the events at Brandham Hall: “A certain set of circumstances had arisen and it was for me to deal with them, just as at school I had had to deal with the persecution of Jenkins and Strode. Then I had succeeded. . . . This time I had failed. . . ” (p. 307).
in his slippers. But it had been a shot in the dark; I had never told Marcus of my father’s lowly social status.” (55–56). And the lesson continues. Marcus explains that when Leo undresses for the night he must not leave his clothes neatly on a chair. “You must leave them lying wherever they happen to fall—the servants will pick them up—that’s what they’re for” (56).³

Leo’s clothing becomes a topic of discussion, and the teasing comments and sarcasm remind Leo of the persecution he suffered at school (56–57). Marcus’s older sister Marian, however, offers to take Leo to the nearby town to buy him a summer suit. Once he is dressed properly, he feels less out of place. Because the suit is Lincoln green, Leo gets the nickname Robin Hood; he delighted by the name, and he imagines himself “roaming the greenwood with Maid Marian” (64). Marian’s good deed is the beginning of Leo’s special relationship with her.

The climax of this strand of the story comes just halfway through the novel, in a cricket match between the Hall and the nearby village. Leo’s ambiguous status at the Hall is reflected by his place on the team—he is the twelfth player, available to field if someone is injured but not available to be a batsman—on the team but not of it. As fate, and the laws of narrative, would have it, one of the players for the Hall is injured late in the game; Leo takes his place on the field and makes the crucial catch. According to Mead’s athletic model of the social self, he has found his place, his role, his self.

In addition to these three narrative layers—Leo in 1952, Leo in 1900 at school, and Leo in 1900 at Brandham Hall—there is another, inner layer: a romantic triangle, which Leo witnesses, without fully understanding. The three points of the triangle are Marian; Lord Trimingham, the ninth Viscount Trimingham, whom Marian is supposed to marry (though the engagement is supposed to be secret); and Ted Burgess, a local farmer, with whom Marian is having an affair. This triangle is marked by class tensions, since Burgess is barely acknowledged by the high society of Marian’s family and friends.

The romantic triangle in this novel can be compared to triangles in other narratives, such as The Master of Ballantrae, The Age of Innocence, and A Room with a View, which we have examined in chapter 5, “Freudian Thirds.” We can imagine that this romantic intrigue could have been the primary focus of interest—in another and rather different novel. The story could have been told from the perspective of any of the three characters involved.

³. Nor does Marcus give instructions to Leo only here: see his comments on the eating of porridge (p. 78) and on wearing a made-up tie (p. 291). These instructions can be compared to Herbert Pocket’s lessons to Pip in Great Expectations; in each instance a lower-class boy is furnishing a new self.
Marian could easily have been the central character, and she does receive much attention in the story. Or the story could have centered on Ted and Trimingham as Hegelian rivals. They are perhaps not a strong double, but they are certainly a contrasting pair: Trimingham is an aristocrat, while Ted is a working farmer; Ted is handsome, while Trimingham has been badly disfigured in the Boer War. Several times Leo makes an explicit comparison between the two, as in his description of the banquet after the cricket match:

Wearing a lounge suit and a high starched collar [Ted] looked even less like himself than he did in [cricket] flannels. The more clothes he put on, the less he looked like himself. Whereas Lord Trimingham's clothes always seemed part of him, Ted's fine feathers made him look like a yokel. (169)

But none of these characters is at the center of the novel as we have it. The romantic triangle is only a component in another story.

Leo is the witness to the romantic triangle, and thus he can be compared to McKellar in *The Master of Ballantrae* and to Nick in *The Great Gatsby*. But the treatment of the witness is different in each of these three novels. McKellar is clearly a subordinate character, though he has enough personality to give him at least a certain individuality, and he also functions to some extent as a guide to the reader's judgments. No one could say, however, that *The Master of Ballantrae* is McKellar's story. Nick, as I have argued in chapter 8, has a more prominent role in *The Great Gatsby*, and he can be seen as an important center of subjectivity, if still subordinated to Gatsby, who is clearly the hero. Leo is a witness, but the story he witnesses takes its meaning and importance from him; this story belongs to Leo and to no one else.

But Leo is not simply the witness to this romantic intrigue: he plays a role in it, as messenger, as go-between. He is an instrumental character. He makes himself useful to others partly in an effort to find his place in the society of Brandham Hall, and the other characters are happy to use him for their own ends. The first message he carries is from Trimingham to Marian (89; see also 117, 145, and elsewhere), but mostly he carries messages back and forth between Marian and Ted. His role as messenger is often mentioned by other characters. Trimingham gives him the nickname Mercury, since Mercury was the messenger to the gods (110 and elsewhere). Ted, rather more prosai-

4. In the epilogue, Marian admits to Leo, “you were our instrument—we couldn’t have carried on without you” (p. 324).
narrative and the self

Leo's role as a messenger is inherent in his character. If Leo is the messenger of the gods, then the other principal characters are the gods themselves. Here the symbolism of the Zodiac becomes operative: Trimingham is the Archer, Ted is the Water-Carrier, and Marian, of course, is the Virgin. Or she should be.

Even as Leo delivers messages for these gods, he does not understand what is going on; sex is a great and terrible mystery to him. A psychoanalytic interpretation of this story is easy, and not out of place. Leo seems to be working through oedipal conflicts: His father has died, and for the moment he is free of his mother's somewhat smothering influence. He is clearly in love with Marian, Robin Hood to her Maid Marian, but in some ways Marian also stands in for his mother. Both Ted and Trimingham stand in paternal relation to him; they are split versions of the father figure. Leo has elevated Trimingham too high for rivalry, but he does feel that Ted is his rival:

I liked Ted Burgess in a reluctant, half-admiring, half-hating way. . . . He was, I felt, what a man ought to be, what I should like to be when I grew up. At the same time I was jealous of him, jealous of his power over Marian, little as I understood its nature, jealous of whatever it was he had that I had not. He came between me and my image of her. In my thoughts I wanted to humiliate him, and sometimes did. But I also identified with him, so that I could not think of his discomfiture without pain, I could not hurt him without hurting myself. (182)

It is not an incidental detail that when Leo wins the cricket match, it is Ted's ball that he catches. Thus Leo is Ted's Hegelian rival for Marian's affections, and thus there is a second and more important triangle.

Although Leo does not understand what is going on, he nonetheless feels the sexual tension that pervades the story. He knows that Marian's affair with

5. In a stroke of irony, just before the cricket match begins, Trimingham tells Ted that he should use Leo to run errands for him—“he's a nailer at that”—and Ted replies, “I'm sure he's a useful young gentleman” (pp. 150–51).

6. In the Author’s Introduction added to the book in 1962, Hartley notes that “Leo was a natural go-between, it was his function in life. . . . His only life was in the lives of other people: cut off from them, he withered” (p. 11).

7. For psychoanalytic interpretations, see Peter Bien and Alan Radley.

8. Leo also out-sings Ted at the banquet after the cricket match. This little victory also plays its part in the rivalry Leo feels, but it is only a supplement to the victory in the cricket match, which would have been sufficient on its own.
Ted is wrong, and once he finds out that Marian is engaged to marry Trimingham (at the end of chapter 13, just before the passage quoted above), he tries unsuccessfully to get out of his role as messenger. He also begins to feel that he is simply being used.

Finally Leo decides to put a stop to the affair. At school he had managed to solve his problem through a magic spell, and now he resorts to the same method. The key to his spell is a large belladonna plant, which is growing in one of the sheds on the estate, evidently unnoticed except by Leo. This plant is first introduced in chapter 2, rather portentously, and then left almost without mention until chapter 21, when Leo goes late at night, all alone and in secret, to gather parts of it for his magic spell. The plant has become a symbolic object; it is probably a metaphor for the poisonous nature of uncontrolled passion, and of course the name of the plant, “beautiful woman,” relates it to Marian. When Leo goes to gather part of the plant for his spell, he finds that it has taken on a kind of autonomy:

I was almost on top of the outhouses before I saw the thick blur of the deadly nightshade. It was like a lady standing in her doorway looking out for someone. I was prepared to dread it, but not prepared for the tumult of emotions it aroused in me. In some way it wanted me, I felt, just as I wanted it; and the fancy took me that it wanted me as an ingredient, and would have me. The spell was not waiting to be born in my bedroom, as I meant it should be, but here in this roofless shed, and I was not preparing it for the deadly nightshade, but the deadly nightshade was preparing it for me. (281)

In his panic he tears up the plant. He then returns to his room and casts the spell. In a sense the spell is successful, but with consequences he does not intend.

The next day is Leo’s thirteenth birthday, and the Maudsleys have planned a party for him. Marian, however, is unaccountably absent. In fact she is meeting Ted, as arranged in the last message Ted gave to Leo. The party goes on, but the tension caused by Miriam’s absence grows. By this time Mrs. Maudsley has figured out that something is going on and that Leo has played a role in it:

9. The introduction of the belladonna plant and its symbolic function are in my opinion the most contrived and least successful aspects of the story.

10. In fact Leo has deliberately falsified this message; he tells Marian that Ted said six, instead of their usual time of six-thirty. I believe that Hartley means that this confusion of time leads to Marian’s absence from the party, so in a sense Leo brings about the disaster that follows; in the epilogue the older Leo says that the falsification had fatal consequences—so in a way the disaster was Leo’s fault.
All at once Mrs Maudsley pushed her chair back and stood up. Her elbows were sticking out, her body was bent and trembling, and her face unrecognizable.

“No,” she said. “We won’t wait. I’m going to look for her. Leo, you know where she is; you shall show me the way.” (304)

But in fact Mrs. Maudsley leads the way, to the shed where the belladonna had grown. There they find Ted and Marian.

It was then that we saw them, together on the ground, the Virgin and the Water-Carrier, two bodies moving like one. I think I was more mystified than horrified; it was Mrs Maudsley’s repeated screams that frightened me, and a shadow on the wall that opened and closed like an umbrella.

I remember very little more, but somehow it got through to me, while I was still at Brandham Hall, that Ted Burgess had gone home and shot himself. (305)

The Epilogue, which immediately follows, first recounts the aftermath of this disaster. Leo suffers a breakdown; even after he begins to recover, he refuses to talk about what had happened or to hear anything about it. Eventually he returns to school, but he and Marcus are no longer friends. He feels responsible for what had happened: “The spell had worked: I couldn’t deny that. It had broken off the relationship between Ted and Marian. . . . But it had recoiled on me. In destroying the belladonna I had also destroyed Ted, and perhaps destroyed myself” (307).

His life thereafter became blighted; he retreated into a world of facts: “Indeed, the life of facts proved no bad substitute for the facts of life” (309). He constructed a life for himself without others.

When the older Leo found the diary, he also found an unaddressed and unopened letter, Marian’s last letter to Ted, which the young Leo had never had the chance to deliver. He opens it now, and he learns that whatever else happened, Marian was not simply using him, and he was not simply the instrument of her desires. He was useful to her, but her affection for him was independent of his usefulness.

The older Leo returns to Brandham Hall, and he finds that Marian is still alive, living in the village nearby. He discovers that she did indeed marry Trimingham; she then had a child seven months later in February of 1901, so the child must be Ted’s. Trimingham died in 1910. Marian’s son died in 1944, in the war, so the current Viscount Trimingham is Marian’s and Ted’s grandson; he lives in a part of Brandham Hall. Some of this information Leo
gathers from memorial markers in the church; some from the current Vis-
count, whom he meets accidentally; and some from Marian herself, whom
he visits. But the current Trimingham seems to be ashamed of his scandalous
origin, and he rarely sees his grandmother.

Leo goes to see Marian, and from her he learns the aftermath of the
events of fifty years before. He also learns that Marian's grandson has hesi-
tated to marry the girl he loves: “He feels . . . that he's under some sort of spell
or curse, and that he'd hand it on” (323). (Marian, of course, does not know
about Leo’s curse, but the reader does; here the author is speaking through
her to the reader.) Marian then gives Leo one final message to deliver: he is
to tell her grandson the story of her love with Ted; he is to tell him that there
was nothing to be ashamed of and that “there's no spell or curse except an
unloving heart” (325). Leo hesitates, but finally he decides to deliver this last
message, and in his so doing, the reader is to feel that he has successfully
reunited the two parts of his self.

I do not pretend that my account exhausts the complexities of this very
carefully constructed narrative; there are many touches of art to be discov-
ered in reading and rereading. My purpose, however, is not so much a com-
plete reading of the novel, but rather a demonstration of the various modes
of subjectivity it deploys.

This story is a Cartesian narrative, the story of a divided self observing
itself and finally to some extent overcoming the division. It also contains two
Freudian triangles: one of Ted and Marian and Trimingham, and another of
Ted and Marian and the young Leo himself. It is the story of Leo’s attempt
and failure to find an adequate social self—through his successful curse at
school, then through his catch in the cricket game, but then through the
disaster in which he played the role of go-between and the blight that came
over his life afterwards. The belladonna plant takes on at least a momentary
subjectivity as a symbol of this disaster. Leo is, of course, the witness to the
events, and he is also an instrument, but a witness and an instrument at the
center of the story.

In this novel there is no single and perhaps no dominant mode of subjec-
tivity, no single idea of what it means to be a self. The self in Hartley’s world
is one thing at one time and another thing at another time, and even two
or more things simultaneously. Analysis is necessary in order to show these
various modes and their interactions and combinations, but it is also to some
extent artificial, as it pretends to disentangle and discriminate what is flow-
ing and fused. How is it possible to pin down the self if it is so various and
so mutable? Is there really a self at all? These questions, raised by my reading
of The Go-Between, should be kept in mind as we consider the portrayal of
the self in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* and in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*.

**II.**

The narrator of Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens, is a butler and the son of a butler. He believes that his father was a great butler, and he takes some trouble to explain exactly what he means. After narrating a couple of instances in which his father behaved in an exemplary manner, he sums it all up in the idea of “dignity”:

And now let me posit this: “dignity” has to do crucially with a butler’s ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits. Lesser butlers will abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation. For such persons, being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; a small push, a slight stumble, and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath. The great butlers are great by the ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming, or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman wears his suit: he will not allow ruffians or circumstance [to] tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of “dignity.” (42–43)

Here dignity and professionalism consist in handing oneself entirely over to a role. And yet there is something of the self that is not identical to the role, just as there is something underneath the clothing one wears. In public one will never go naked, but underneath the clothing there is a naked body, which will be revealed only in private; there is also a naked self underneath the role one plays. So the self is at once entirely subsumed in the role, and yet essentially different from it.11

This passage is in some ways similar to another passage, this one not from a novel, but from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. Whereas Ishiguro inserts a little passage of philosophy in the midst of his narrative, Sartre inserts a little passage of narrative in the midst of his philosophy:

11. This view of the self should, of course, be attributed to Stevens, the character, rather than to Ishiguro, the novelist. Indeed, much of the novel is a critique of this view, expressed particularly through the housekeeper, Miss Kenton; see, for example, p. 154: “Why, Mr. Stevens, why, why, why, do you always have to pretend?”
Let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing, he is assuming himself. But what is he playing? He is playing at being a waiter in a café. (59)

Sartre, like Ishiguro, places great importance on the relationship between the social role and the self, and, like Ishiguro, he ultimately distinguishes the self from the social role it plays. Sartre’s idea of the self and Ishiguro’s are more than a little similar, and yet there is also a difference—a difference in dignity. Sartre’s waiter is always in excess of his role, and this excess constitutes a violation of dignity; through this undignified excess we see the person as distinct from the role. Could Sartre have told the same story about a waiter who did not move a little too quickly, who is not a little too solicitous, who does not imitate an automaton? The great butler certainly would not be in such a state of excess. He does not want to call attention to the difference between his role and his self. Ishiguro seems to draw this contrast quite specifically:

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of. . . . If I may return to my earlier metaphor—you will excuse my putting it so coarsely—they are like a man who will, at the slightest provocation, tear off his suit and shirt and run about screaming. In a word, “dignity” is beyond such persons. (43)

There are two ways to call attention to the condition of being clothed and to the difference between being clothed and being naked. One way is to take off your clothes, but the other is to wear clothing that obviously does not fit, and to call attention to the bad fit. This is the way of Sartre’s waiter. For Sartre, bad fit leads to bad faith (mauvaise foi).
These passages call into question the relation between the self and its roles. When the social clothing is removed, what then remains? What was left of my grandfather when he put away all his twenty different business cards? What is the naked self?

Richard Lanham distinguishes two fundamental attitudes toward the self, one of which he labels “serious” and the other “rhetorical.” According to the serious attitude, “[e]very man possesses a central self, an irreducible identity” (1). But “[r]hetorical man is an actor; his reality public, dramatic. His sense of identity, his self, depends on the reassurance of daily histrionic reenactment” (4). Lanham’s two representative figures are Plato and Ovid: “all serious poets finally, like Plato, posit a referential mystic center and all rhetorical stylists try, like Ovid, to avoid one” (36).12

Alasdair MacIntyre draws something of the same contrast between Sartre, who “depicted the self as entirely distinct from any particular social role,” and Erving Goffman, who “liquidated the self into its role playing, arguing that the self is no more than a ‘peg’ on which the clothes of the role are hung” (30–31).13 But, as MacIntyre points out, these two apparently opposed positions are not really so different. If Goffman’s roles are hung on a peg, that peg is presumably the self; on the other hand, Sartre’s self turns out to consist of negation, “not a substance but a set of perpetually open possibilities” (31).

The analysis presented in this study is in no way intended to suggest that there is no self. My argument tends in another direction. The primary subjectivities I have described can be exchanged, but the narrated self must always wear one or another; there is no place in narrative for the naked self. As soon as the self enters language, as soon as it is spoken of, it necessarily takes on some kind of subjectivity, which will inevitably be expressed in some kind of semantic role. According to MacIntyre, “in Goffman’s anecdotal descriptions of the social world there is still discernable that ghostly ‘I,’ the psychological peg to whom Goffman denies substantial selfhood” (31). But this self may not be a nominative “I”—it may be an accusative “me,” or (in Latin) a dative “mihi,” or (in Proto-Indo-European) an instrumental or a locative.

Language by its nature imposes these roles. Synchronously, we learn these semantic roles when we learn language; diachronically, human speakers have

12. Achilles and Odysseus are another representative pair: Achilles is the stable self who then changes his mind; Odysseus is the mutable self who retains a fixed goal.

13. According to Goffman, the self is a “performed character,” a “dramatic effect”; what matters is not its essential truth, but “whether it will be credited or discredited”; the person and the body “merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time” (pp. 252–53). What Goffman calls the self I call the subject, and what he calls the peg may be what I think of as the self.
built these roles into language in order to say what seems most important about the roles of the self.

But language does not exhaust reality; the self in language or the self in narrative is not the only self there is. One can express oneself, for example, in music, and this musical self, I expect, would not be bound by deep-structure semantic roles—though it might be bound by other roles, roles that belong to music rather than to language. I feel, though I cannot prove it, that the self is more than its linguistic subjectivities. Take these away, and there is still some mystic residue, some self before we talk, and after. But whatever the self is outside of language, we have no way to talk about it.

No doubt my grandfather had a self when he was by himself, but whenever he presented that self to someone else, he had a business card in hand, a story to tell, a role to play. Whenever we tell stories, we place ourselves and others in various roles; we choose and deal out cards—cards labeled “agent,” “patient,” “witness,” “instrument,” and so on—from the deck language provides. These cards are roles of semantic deep structure, and they are the self in its subjectivity. The stories we tell select and combine these roles as elements in the geometry of plots, and these plots, in all the configurations and complications devised by storytellers, become in turn ways of understanding the roles of the self, the modes of subjectivity.
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