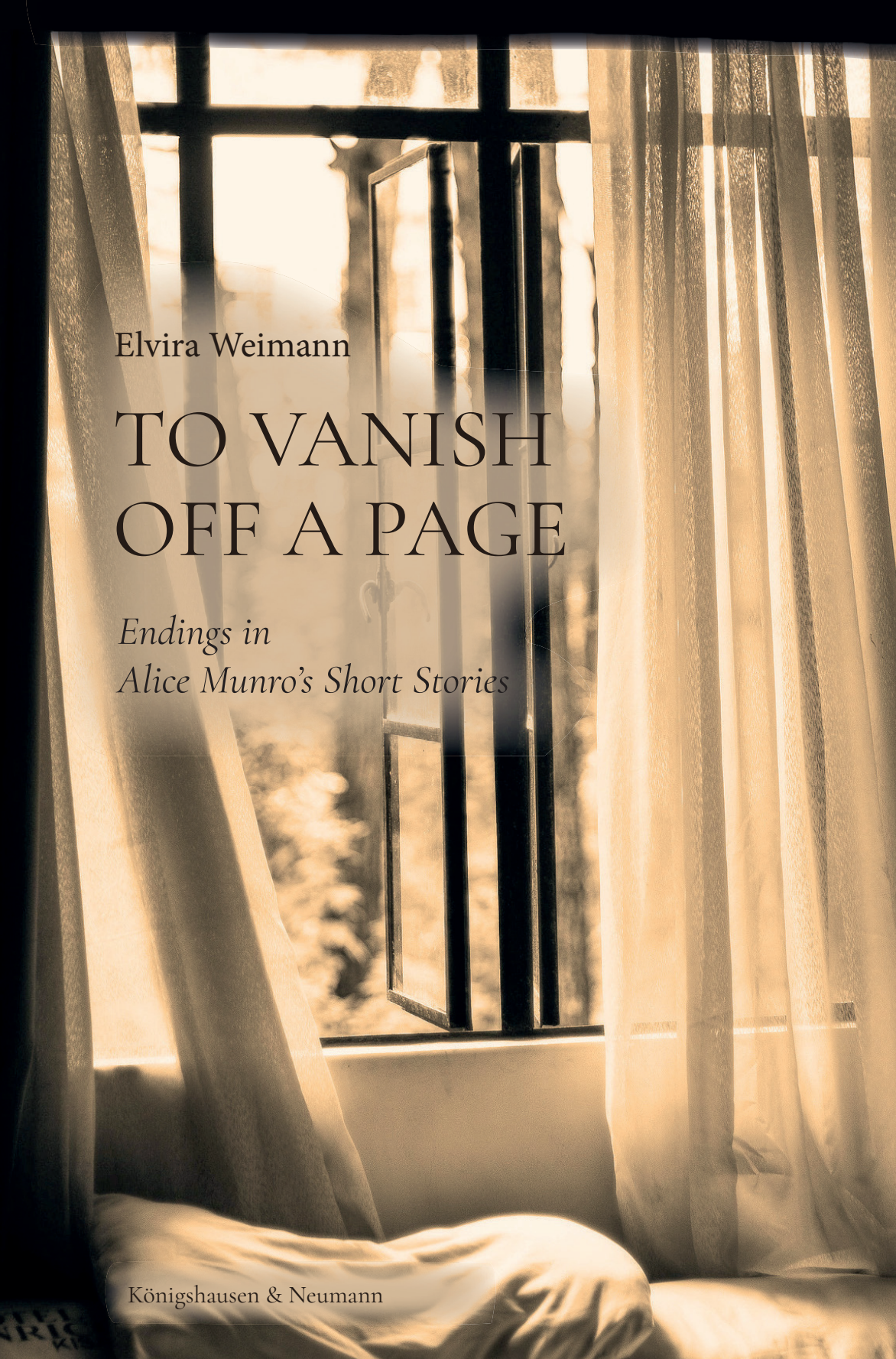


Elvira Weimann

TO VANISH OFF A PAGE

Endings in Alice Munro's Short Stories

Königshausen & Neumann

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To Ludmilla, William, Louis, and Lily

1. Introduction

1.1 Finally Acknowledged: Canadian Literature, the Short Story, and Its Master

When the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Alice Munro in 2013, it was her ground-breaking style and effective implementation of the genre's format and narrative potential that led the short story to the most triumphant turning point in its history. Distinguished by the highest literary award**,** the short story could no longer be denied the status of a genre "as sophisticated as the novel" (Gullason 1976, 14). Munro, the first Canadian author to be granted this prestigious honor, was celebrated by the Nobel Prize Committee as the "master of the contemporary short story" (Nobel Prize 2013). Overall, she published twelve short story collections and the short story cycles *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* In addition to the Nobel Prize, she won several reputable awards, such as the Governor General's Award for Fiction, the Man Booker International Prize, the Giller Prize, and many more. She worked with famous Canadian and American journals and publishing houses, establishing a devoted national and international readership[1] among both the general public and esteemed literary critics.[2] When the author died in May 2024 at the age of 92, she left behind a rich corpus of short stories that has secured her a firm position in the tradition of English short stories and world literature as a whole. Her piercing insights and meticulous character portrayals, which often seem to expose the deepest mechanisms of human nature, solidified her standing as an exceptionally gifted writer who excels at expressing her astute observations through an equally ingenious style. This literary standing endures even after her daughter's shocking revelations following Munro's death in 2024 have profoundly shattered the writer's personal reputation.[3]

Thirteen years after winning the Nobel Prize, her oeuvre stands as indisputable evidence of the fact that this honor was well-deserved. Equally important, the award was also a symbolic tribute to the numerous achievements of writers within the short story genre and Canadian literature. As Reingard M.

1 See Robert Thacker on the translations of Munro's works (2011, 463).

2 By the time Carol Mazur and Cathy Moulder conducted the research for their annotated bibliography of works by and on Munro in 2007, they had identified over 1,300 academic publications (2007, 325). Since then, almost two decades have passed, and numerous impressive studies such as Isla Duncan's *Alice Munro's Narrative Art* or Robert Thacker's recently published *Alice Munro's Late Style: 'Writing is the Final Thing'* have significantly contributed to the critical reception of Munro's oeuvre.

3 Munro's daughter, Andrea Skinner, revealed in July 2024 that her mother had refused to leave her husband, Gerald Fremlin, after learning that he had previously sexually assaulted Andrea.

Nischik points out: "It had become increasingly inexplicable that a country with such internationally renowned literary luminaries as Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Michael Ondaatje had not yet received the Nobel Prize" (2017, 72). Irrefutably, the same is true of the short story. With writers such as Anton Chekhov, Guy de Maupassant, and Edgar Allan Poe among its founding fathers and Alice Munro, Joyce Carol Oates, Carol Shields**,** and many others among its more recent practitioners writing in English, the short story has attracted some of the world's most talented authors. Nevertheless, prior to Munro, the Nobel Prize Committee had never accredited writers specifically for their short fiction work (see Nischik 2017, 72; 2014, 360). For instance, while Ernest Hemingway was a skilled short story writer, the Committee chose to highlight a piece of his longer narrative prose, the novella *The Old Man and the Sea* (Nobel Prize 1954). The preference for literary productions in other genres indirectly fostered the impression that the short story was not a literary medium worthy of praise.[4] Particularly harmful in previous assessments of short fiction was critics' continual tendency to compare it with the novel. Due to its longer narrative space, the novel was often considered to offer greater possibilities for artistic refinement and complexity of plot. Furthermore, perhaps because most former practitioners of the genre were also committed to writing novels, for a long time it was a widely shared opinion that the primary function of the short story, as Roger Allen complains, was to provide a "practice-ground for the novel" (1994, xvii; see also Shaw 1983, 2).

In an interview with Harold Horwood, Munro herself expresses a similar attitude, confiding that, at the beginning of her career, she wrote stories "sort of as an exercise, because I thought this would be really easy" (Munro in Horwood 1984, 123). However, when later pressured by her publisher, the experience of having to write a novel led her to the conclusion: "I was never going to write a real novel because I could not think that way" (Munro in McCaig 2002, 92).[5] *Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* are short story cycles rather than novels (see Nischik 2017, 8; 166), and for Munro, "the single story," as she so compellingly declares, is "the most attractive kind of writing of all" (Munro in Hancock 1987, 190).[6] Reflecting on her life's work, she quite confidently claims: "I've tried to write novels […]. They turn into strange, hybrid stories […]. I haven't read a novel that I didn't think couldn't have been a better story" (Munro in Merkin 2004). This unyielding devotion to a genre that seems to come to her as the most natural medium of artistic expression sensitized both

4 See, for instance, Thomas A. Gullason, who complains that "both short story and short-story writer are clearly underrated, even ignored, by professional and academic critics, publishers, some literary artists, and by general readers" (1976, 13).

5 See also Nischik on Munro's commitment to the short story genre (2007, 205).

6 See also Nischik (2017, 166–79).

readers and literary scholars to the potential the condensed narrative space of the short story could offer.

Interestingly, Munro's choice of the short story genre is closely connected to the second beneficiary of her award: Canadian literature. During the second half of the twentieth century, Canada saw a magnificent development of a literary culture paralleling Munro's success. Regarding English-Canadian short fiction, Robert Thacker even draws a direct connection between the writer's career and the latest and most important developments of the genre in Canada (2004, 177). The planned airing of one of Munro's earliest short stories, "The Strangers," on Robert Weaver's broadcast *Canadian Short Stories* on June 1st, 1951, was canceled due to the release of the Massey Commission Report—an account of the state of Canadian art and culture enclosing suggestions for improvement that resulted in the foundation of the National Library and the instituting of the Canada Council (see Kröller 2004, 8). Munro's story was broadcast later in the same year. In Thacker's opinion, the concurrence of both events offers "an apt point of departure for a discussion of the Canadian short story in English" (2004, 177). Indeed, the debut story of an unknown young writer, on the one hand, and the initiatives started by the Massey Commission Report, on the other, present a peculiar parallel and thus seem plausible markers of the beginning of the so-called *Canadian Renaissance.* This era of various ambitious undertakings and abounding positive results eventually led to the establishment of an acknowledged Canadian literary culture, holding a secure position in world literature. To this development, the short story made a substantial contribution, and so did Munro.

My thesis, first and foremost, is devoted to exploring the short story poetics of this brilliant writer, who helped mold the genre into the complex structural and thematic texture that is now the state of the art. My analytical focus lies on a narrative device widely understood as a distinctive feature of the short story genre: the literary ending. Ever since Poe stressed the impact endings exerted on readers within a short narrative space, the endings of short stories have been widely considered to produce a unique effect. Moreover, literary endings in general count as particularly important narrative moments, offering resolutions, revelations, and conclusions. In this sense, they entail an epistemic promise, which is critical to readers' understanding of the function and value of literature. Taking the analysis of her endings as a point of departure, my study thus intends to explore the "epistemic work" (Basseler 2015, 89; 2019, 55) that Munro's fiction performs within the short narrative space of her chosen genre. In this way, my project intends to investigate Munro's realization of the short story's narrative potential. Specifically, I am interested in reviewing what meaning the genre can convey despite or because of its brevity, how it conveys this meaning, and how it encourages readers to expand on the presented meaning. This focus should yield a deeper understanding of contemporary short fiction, accessed through Munro as its present-day "master."

Munro's work is widely known for her "tantalizingly open-ended" style (Gadpaille 1988, 79) and simultaneously applauded for her meticulous art and intricate design and thorough structuring of her stories.[7] However, such comments are often made in passing as side observations in the studies of Munrovian themes. Critical work on her compositions has not sufficiently explored the relationship between form and theme. There is not enough insight into how Munro's supposedly open endings are embedded in her structures, whether her compositions enhance or oppose the open-end effect, and how this interplay reflects on the epistemic quality of her fiction and her epistemological position as a writer. Although there are a few studies targeting the question of endings in Munro's fiction, these analyses are small-scale projects confined to the reading of individual stories and thus offer only a limited perspective on this important element in her fiction. My study aims to narrow this gap and offer fresh insights into the writer's craft. Nonetheless, the results of previous studies highlight idiosyncratic traits of Munro's style that my project builds upon and expands. However, my analysis is not intended as a development of these theses but employs their arguments as a reference framework whenever they buttress or contradict my own findings. The three major stylistic tendencies derivable from the studies of Munro's endings include the supposition that Munro a) creates openness through multiplicity (Gerlach 2007; Ware 2006), b) departs from the original conception of the epiphany to question the possibility of insight (Ware 2006; Gadpaille 1988; Hovind 2015), and c) employs her endings as vehicles for metafictional reflection (Eldredge 1984).

Moving beyond these studies' focus on Munro's use of styles and techniques, my analysis highlights the central and symbiotic role of Munro's endings as narrative devices, subjects of metafictional and epistemological inquiry, and themes (e.g., death, age, separation). What is more, it demonstrates that Munro's stories challenge the plausibility of teleology as a viable epistemological framework, promising resolutions at the end while stressing the necessity of closure in fiction and life. In this sense, I illustrate that Munro's endings are not merely open but are informed by a coexisting duality of openness and effective closure. This, in turn, is not a mere stylistic device but a crucial function of her stories' "epistemic work" and a means of expressing her epistemological position on the potential of storytelling and story-reception. Furthermore, my readings of Munro's stories reveal that the writer experiments with endings to explore the potential inherent in storytelling and story-reception as an innate human means of deriving knowledge, meaning, and truth. It proves that Munro deploys a variety of different techniques, including spatiality, multiplicity, metafiction, the subversion of and adherence to traditional conclusions, and epistemic

7 A recent reference to her style is Sabrina Francesconi's observation that "Munro is, indeed, a meticulous writer, continuously polishing, refining, honing her style" (2017, 52).

impasses to point to the implausibility and impossibility of closed endings while preparing readers for the oncoming end and encouraging future rereadings and interpretation. My thesis argues that Munro's endings should be classified as intermediate stops. These offer consciously imperfect yet temporarily functional conclusions, allowing readers to detach from the fictional world, return to reality, and continue interpretive work on their own.

In addition, the ending is important in Munro's fiction not only because of her skillful and intricate means of bringing her stories to a close, but also because it frequently serves as a theme or subject of metafictional reflection. Overall, my analysis demonstrates that Munro conceives of closure as a dynamic process. This creates a complex dialectic, emerging from her compositional style and the thematization of endings and closure in her oeuvre. It includes the pursuit of meaning, which is intrinsic to being and thus perpetual; the acceptance of temporary conclusions, which enables detachment; and the liberating yet also temporary insight that sometimes stories simply do not make sense. In some of the analyzed stories, Munro's characters find themselves entrapped by narratives they cannot close off. Living with these stories requires them to reach a temporary interpretation and a provisional sense of closure to cope with these stories' difficult content. As a result, Munro's fiction oscillates between the understanding that closure is an essential aspect of human life and fiction and the concern that the necessity for conclusions, as moments of insight and clarification, may entrap people within the internalized logic of narrative structures that affect their perception of identity, reality, and happiness. This metafictional and epistemological concern profoundly informs Munro's compositions, her discussion of endings on the thematic level, and the epistemic investigations conducted by the characters and narrators of her stories.

To do justice to this complex function of her short story endings in connection with an analysis of her short story poetics, I examine her endings from various angles. I analyze the construction and function of Munro's endings against the backdrop of features widely considered to be characteristic of the genre, her fiction, or general closure conventions. These include unity, spatiality, liminality, and ending types traditionally associated with the characters Munro is best known for: women. My findings show that Munro's stories and endings largely abide by the characteristic features of the genre, yet they stretch the boundaries wherever it is necessary to follow her epistemic explorations or to explore the complex nature of life, knowledge, meaning, and truth. Furthermore, my readings bring to light that Munro's short stories are informed by two distinctive authorial assumptions about the nature of fiction. The first is her conception of fiction as a spatial ground, and the second is the indirectly implied epistemological supposition that fathoming complex material requires repetition, that is, reuse, rewriting, and rereading. For both positions, I argue, the brief narrative space of the genre offers a suitable medium. On the one hand,

it allows Munro to constantly rework her material; on the other hand, it yields the possibility to compose her plots by outsourcing central elements to readers' contributions. This strategy creates a rich potential for meaning that readers can evaluate or expand upon as they read and reread. My analysis displays that, in Munro's hands, the condensed narrative space of the genre becomes a fertile ground for the deployment of triggering techniques, such as metaphor or metonymy, which creates a wide potential for interpretation. This potential suggests that Munro conceives of the short story as a collaborative vehicle for investigating unfathomable material alongside her readers.

Furthermore, although Munro rejects teleology and the ending as the goal of epistemic motivation, she does not question the human necessity to pursue knowledge, meaning, and truth through fiction. Michael Basseler's suggested split between "philosophers and literary scholars [who] have, often fervently, either defended or abandoned the claim that fictional literary texts have a cognitive value" (2015, 77), without doubt, places Munro into the first category.[8] As she confides, "'mostly in my stories I like to look at what people don't understand'" (Munro, qtd. in Gadpaille 1988, 77). Her stories are meant as a pursuit of a better understanding of reality. Following this endeavor, my findings show, Munro's compositions test the possibilities of fiction, expanding its boundaries and raising awareness of its limits. Throughout her fourteen volumes, her stories never cease to stress the marvelous power inherent in fiction and fiction-making to transform and illuminate. Endings play a decisive part in this regard, as they promise revelation and thus always engage readers in the process of making meaning, even when they cannot provide the answers.

1.2 Surviving Post-Teleology: Why Endings in Contemporary Literature Still Matter

The Flaws of Teleology

In the late evening hours of a day in Toronto, a man walks out of a hospital, heading nowhere. Ray, as he is called, moved to Toronto four years ago after his wife, Isabel, had been admitted to the city's hospital. She had suffered from pericarditis almost throughout their entire married life. That evening, she died. He walks out of the building, placing one foot ahead of the other without

8 Basseler dates this debate back to Plato and Aristotle. He does not, however, further differentiate between philosophers and literary scholars, of whom the latter seem to be more likely the ones who "defended" the view. Yet he assumes that "many readers of (short) fiction" must share the experience of being transformed by reading "literary texts" (2015, 77).

aim. His thoughts drift to a girl he bumped into at the hospital. She is an old acquaintance from Maverley—the place where he and his wife used to live. Recently, she divorced her husband and lost custody of her children. She has also moved to Toronto, now living completely alone. As Ray walks out of the hospital, he contemplates all the losses they both have suffered and is shocked to realize that, among all those things, he can no longer remember her name. In the end, however, the memory comes back to him:

> Leah.
> A relief out of all proportion, to remember her.
> (*DL* 90)

"Leaving Maverley" is the third story of Munro's final collection, *Dear Life*. It is an excellent example of the critically acclaimed characteristics of her writing. Among these, predominantly salient in this story are the "intangible sense of connection" (Gadpaille 1988, 70) and the strongly felt "desire […] for some kind of meaning" despite "the acceptance of the randomness of most of experience" as well as "the insistence on the inexplicable nature of events" (Osmond 1991, 85). Moreover, the story offers a powerful example of Munro's intricate narrative structures and her masterful implementation of the ending as a multifunctional narrative device. "Leaving Maverley" is a comment on endings and the tools at hand to make sense of them.

In *Closure and the Novel,* Marianna Torgovnick advances the opinion that "in part, we [readers] value endings because the retrospective patterning used to make sense of texts corresponds to one process used to make sense of life: the process of looking back over events and interpreting them in light of 'how things turned out'" (1981, 5). In "Leaving Maverley," this highly teleological practice is provoked by the construction of the narrative itself. From the very beginning, a strong emphasis on the interplay of causes and effects suggests an underlying teleological design. Annoyed by his pregnant ticket-taker's sudden leave, the owner of the town's cinema hires the first girl that is suggested to him. Leah comes from a strictly religious family and is not allowed to walk home alone after work. Ray, a police officer who works only at night to take care of his sick wife during the day, is hired as her custodian. These simple facts weave the story's basic texture. The thorough description of causes and effects stirs readers' expectations of teleology, suggesting that the story will maintain a plausible causality and eventually culminate in an illuminative revelation that will clarify the story's gist.

However, at the end, the procedure of evaluating events and characters in retrospect turns out to be fruitless, even cruel. When Leah intends to send her children to Sunday school, many years after running away and eloping with the son of the town's minister, Ray's wife Isabel concludes that her life "'sounds pretty

commonplace, after all'" (*DL* 83). For her, Leah exists only in a story narrated by Ray. The initially fascinating narrative of a young woman who has the courage to break free from the religious constraints imposed on her by her family loses its appeal when Leah ends up being an ordinary woman who adheres to the values of her upbringing. "In light of 'how things turned out,'" the once exciting incidents of her life seem to be pointless facts in a failed narrative that has not managed to culminate in a meaningful conclusion.

Isabel's disappointed and slightly condescending opinion lays bare the deficiencies of an evaluation system based entirely on teleology. "In light of 'how things turned out,'" the characters' lives fail to establish meaning in retrospect. After being miraculously rescued during the war, Ray decides to do something meaningful and returns to school, where he meets Isabel. Eventually, however, he ends up alone, without a wife, children, or a job he loves. Isabel dies after spending four years in a coma. Her illness is a stroke of fate, caused by no fault of her own. It could not have been deferred by her patriotic choice to teach throughout the war, nor by the children she might have had otherwise. According to teleological philosophy, the end must reveal a meaningful causality and evince the hidden purpose of seemingly inexplicable events. As Andrew Woodfield puts it, "questions about teleology are, broadly, to do with whether a thing has a purpose or is acting for the sake of a purpose" (1976, 1). In "Leaving Maverley," however, the procedure of evaluating life "in light of 'how things turned out'" yields no sensible conclusion, explanation, or enhanced understanding of experience. The emphasis is put on the randomness of the causes that trigger events, as well as on their lack of destination. Things happen and cause other things to happen, but none of this must ultimately make sense or make sense only because situations turned out a certain way.

Moreover, "Leaving Maverley" defies teleology as a viable philosophy to give meaning and value to human life, also through its merciless portrayal of what endings in life truly are. Ray's overwhelmingly painful reaction to Isabel's death creates a sharp contrast to the deaths in the movies he discusses with Leah. Films show "people getting up from being murdered in various ways the moment the camera was off them. Alive and well" (*DL* 72–73). His sudden awareness that Isabel was just not there anymore—"not at all, as if not ever" (90)—strongly stresses the irrecoverable finality of human lives. Ray's bafflement about the word "remains" shows the sheer absurdity of a possible connection between the once living being and its now empty and unresponsive body—"like something left to dry out in sooty layers in a cupboard" (90). This perspective on endings renders any attempt to read purposefulness and meaningful causality into the narrated events untenable. The life plots of all three main characters present realities that are too complex to be smoothed out to a plausible conclusion.

It is, however, precisely this plausibility, clarity, and conclusiveness that are traditionally expected of a literary ending. Helmut Bonheim makes an

elementary but truthful observation, stating that "we [the readers] expect endings, much more than beginnings, to show what the story was about, what special effect was to be achieved" (1982, 118). Andrew Craig similarly observes that in literature, "an ending provides reason for whatever precedes it" (2006). It seems to be an unwritten law that fictional endings must answer demands for teleology, that is, that they are supposed to clarify and justify all parts narrated beforehand. Even if an ending may startle readers at first, it presents a point of departure for retrospective interpretation. What is more, any suggested interpretation is expected to disclose meaningful connections between the ending and the narrative, to display how the ending bestows meaning on the whole. It thus seems that the evaluation of a narrative's ending is one of the most crucial aspects informing readers' assessments of fiction. Its importance and lasting influence arguably result from both human nature and preceding traditions of storytelling.

Nature and Tradition

In *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction,* Frank Kermode advances the opinion that the importance of endings in literature stems from the condition of human existence on earth. He conjectures that in a world where time has no tangible frame, humanity experiences a strong need for structure and pattern that culminates in a variety of apocalyptic narratives artificially establishing said frame (see Kermode 2000, 6–8). This need for structure arises from humanity's desire to perceive itself as connected to something outside of the progression of its own time and reality—"a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end" (4). To fulfill humanity's fundamental desire for structure, apocalyptic narratives provide congruent arrangements where "the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end" (6). These narratives, Kermode's argument implies, result in resolving, unifying, and coherent endings that influence readers' evaluation and appreciation of fiction as well as their reflections on reality.[9]

It is important to note that, according to Kermode's theory, the ending exerts its power not only in unified and harmoniously structured narratives but also in narratives containing disruptions and frustrated expectations that equally rely on the text's denouement. "Clerkly skepticism" (2000, 10) is a term Kermode introduces to describe doubts concerning the possibility that life could progress as coherently as suggested by fiction. This skepticism gives rise

9 Albrecht Koschorke classifies this type of approach to locating the origins of fiction as "anthropological." The anthropological approach seems to encapsulate the three main functions of literature suggested by Kermode's theory: "overcoming anxiety, creating meaning, orientation" (2018, 2). See Koschorke for further possible explanations (2018, 3-4).

to counter-narratives that employ the device of "peripeteia" out of "our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route" (18). "Peripeteia" is defined by Aristotle in the *Poetics* as "the change of fortune in the action of the play to the opposite state of affairs" (1968, XI). Developing the idea of the twist or "change of fortune," Kermode seems to conceive of the peripeteia as a sudden element of openness that simulates a closer resemblance to reality but, in the end, is nonetheless resolved. Thus, while apocalyptic narratives attempt to explain and structure the world, "clerkly skepticism" arises when fiction fails in comparison with reality. In both cases, however, the ending controls the experience of readers. As Kermode emphasizes, a peripeteia "depends on our [the readers'] confidence of the end" (18): "It is a disconfirmation followed by a consonance" (18). In other words, readers' expectations are frustrated at first, but as the ending eventually concludes the narrative with some illumination, they believe in having gained truth after all.

Kermode's hypothesis posits that the hope that life will make sense in the end is a fundamental source of human interest in fiction. Accordingly, there is a pre-fictional expectation that shapes the structure of stories, which then reshapes our ways of interpreting life. From Kermode, it could be derived that we invent stories to help us interpret life, and we construe life "in light of 'how things turned out,'" because stories taught us that the end is the point of departure from which meaning will become visible. Kermode's supposition further suggests that complexity in fiction is a means of conjuring up a likeness to reality, which, however, is enjoyed only because of the ending's promise to resolve it. Without it, fiction would have no value, as it would not differ from reality itself. Thus, humanity generates fiction as a vehicle for artificially imposing structure on life, which, on its own, is shaped only by an inevitable progression from beginning to end, often lacking meaningful correlations and enlightening causality. As William Carlos Williams puts forward, "there are no beginnings and ends in nature—except birth and death—which are meaningless to us" (1950, 14). The ability to perceive the progression between these two poles as coherent, consequential, purposeful, and interconnected offers humanity the illusionary possibility to infuse experiences with a deeper meaning and defy arbitrariness. The idea of gaining meaning in retrospect, therefore, could be attributed to humanity's fear of death and the possible insignificance of their existence, as well as to their inability to cope with unexplained pain, failure, injustice, and unpredictability. The tradition of storytelling, however, turns this idea into an internalized substructure, influencing our assessment of the value of fiction and life.

A substructure is an internalized structure that produces underlying expectations of narrative moments or narrative proceedings, such as the expectation of the ending to hold truth and give meaning in retrospect. In occidental cultures, end-oriented, teleological substructures have, for millennia, played a dominant role in shaping prevalent logic and value systems. The Bible,

for instance, being one of the most fundamental text collections of Western civilization, displays a teleological substructure as all assembled stories participate in a meaningful progression portraying humanity's entire history from Genesis to the Apocalypse (see Kermode 2000, 6–7). In addition, the Apocalypse is not merely an ending but an anticipated happy conclusion. It is the moment when every detail falls into place and God's plan becomes fully visible, rationalizing prior peripeteias or incongruities in the narrative, that is, pain, terror, suffering, and evil. The Bible thus situates humanity on a timeline progressing toward a purposeful ending, that is, the plotline of a traditional story (see Kermode 6). By strongly emphasizing the end purpose, it arms individuals against the complexities of existence and helps them accept the inexplicable in the here and now. It thus produces a dominant narrative whose ending controls an undefined amount of anteriority, that is, it influences the perception of contemporaneous reality at any given moment whenever the Bible is read. Against this background, it seems reasonable to argue that over the centuries, the Bible has produced a compelling teleological substructure that has influenced the value and logic systems of millions of people.

However, substructures create a false familiarity with the logic of causes-and-effects that governs our expectations of fiction and life. At their best, they render people optimistic, helping them to hold on to the belief that everything will turn out well in the end. At their worst, they falsify their perception of reality, fiction, or art, respectively, turning them blind against the ill and evil of their situation and feeding them with hopes of an eventually beneficial resolution. In the present context, the substructure in question can be equated with teleology itself.

The Decline of Teleology

Similar but slightly different from substructures are the so-called metanarratives. These also organize people's experiences and perceptions of reality. However, while by "substructures" I refer to the very logic underlying the succession and interpretation of narrative events in fiction, metanarratives present a broader term employed for the "'narratives that attempt to explain the nature of the human condition'" (Thompson 2004, 107), or in Linda Hutcheon's words, "the various narrative systems by which human society orders and gives meaning, unity, and 'universality' to its experience" (1989, 39). Metanarratives, hence, are overarching, explanatory narratives guiding individuals' and societies' interpretation of life. They play a chief role in this context because they are often teleological, although, as Willie Thompson remarks, they must not necessarily be so. In his own words, "all teleologies are metanarratives, but not all metanarratives are teleologies" (113). Thus, metanarratives can equally be based on a teleological substructure and affect our evaluation of endings, goals,

and purposes and thus offer tools of influence to those who control them. In the present context, metanarratives may help to shed light on the reasons why traditional endings and teleological substructures came under scrutiny during the modernist and postmodernist periods.

Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of metanarratives presents one of the first and most prominent inquiries into the subject. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* Lyotard offers a comment on the status and state of metanarratives in the postmodern age. For him, a metanarrative belongs to a specific kind of knowledge—narrative knowledge that exists alongside scientific knowledge and "is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality" (Lyotard 1984, 7). Thus, it is a means of arranging and governing social life through narratives. Lyotard, for his part, focuses on the metanarratives, or grand narratives, that arose during modernity. With their widely proclaimed rejection of divine authority, these metanarratives, as he argues, have substituted the Christian God with another reference for legitimization: the triumph of human reason, knowledge, and freedom.[10] Hence, instead of a divinely instituted peace and salvation at the end of all being, modernity introduced seemingly achievable aims that humanity could actively pursue and enjoy on earth. In doing so, it empowered humanity while retaining the comforting sensation that the life of every individual partook of the achievement of a higher purpose. Thus, the metanarratives of modernity widely rejected the Christian belief in a God-governed universe but retained the same teleological substructure.[11]

The wide celebration of openness and open-endedness in Western literature of the twentieth century indicates that Kermode's "clerkly skepticism" in this period rose to an unprecedented degree, leading to radical changes in both metanarratives and substructures. The most intriguing aspect of Lyotard's contribution to metanarratives is his announcement of their demise. In 1984, Lyotard defined the postmodern age as an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984, xxiv). This incredulity is an intellectual position substantially related to the changes in art and literature starting at the onset of modernism and reaching their peak during postmodernism. In these periods, artists began to reject traditional ways of storytelling and searched for new modes of representation

10 Lyotard distinguishes two "grand narratives": the "speculative narrative" and the "narrative of emancipation" (1984, 37). The first, put in simple terms, regards the achievement of unified and absolute knowledge as the end to and purpose of all human inquiries, hypotheses, and attempts at understanding the world (31–35). It also serves as the background against which learning and research are justified (see Lyotard 31–37). The other grand narrative, the "narrative of emancipation," establishes humanity's freedom as the end to which knowledge itself is subservient (35–36). As stressed by Lyotard, "the principle of the movement animating the people is not the self-legitimation of knowledge, but the self-grounding of freedom" (35).

11 For a concise but thorough summary and evaluation of Lyotard's philosophical contribution, consult Simon Malpas's *Jean-François Lyotard* (2003).

of and interaction with reality. According to Lyotard, this was primarily due to technological progress and the experience of atrocities during the wars of the twentieth century. The first, he states, brought a "shifted emphasis from the ends of actions to its means" (37), displacing the focus of interest from the uncovering of end purposes and hidden designs to the explanation of their functioning. The second led to the realization that traditional metanarratives had to be rejected due to their ability to legitimize violence (see Lyotard 36–7). It thus seems that the de-emphasis of end purposes brought about a decrease in teleological substructures, while the fabrication of all-explaining narratives fell out of fashion due to their dangerous potential.

On a large scale, these developments changed the understanding of the function of narrative endings, not to mention their style. Craig's above-quoted statement that endings ought to explain the story they terminate expresses an outdated belief. During modernism and postmodernism, endings became more open, incoherent, and ambiguous, inviting readers to participate in the construction of meaning more actively. In Kermode's words, readers were no longer "offered easy satisfactions, but a challenge to creative co-operation" (2000, 19). Fragmentations, disruptive structures, and open and unresolved endings suggested that the attempt to understand and structure a chaotic reality by means of writing and reading neatly structured fictions lost its appeal and credibility. As John Gerlach puts it, "in the twentieth century, endings were identified with the way causality and narrative restricted fiction by falsifying its view of life, and at this point writers frequently strove to give the impression of lack of resolution" (1985, 3). Reality had proven painfully that time progressed without order and aim, suggesting that the teleological explanations and ideals of modernity were as incapable of improving human life as religious beliefs. The meaningful interconnections between beginnings, middles, and endings found in books could not stand against the obvious purposelessness of human suffering, as experienced during the two World Wars. The idea of both a benevolently organized and organizable world seemed discarded, giving way to openness, arbitrariness, ambiguity, and obscurity in art and literature.

The growing awareness of the potential danger of metanarratives, as described by Lyotard, further complicated the relationship between art, reality, and the function of literary endings. According to Lyotard, reality not only eludes any narrative's attempt to behold it but, in fact, can be distorted by a narrative in the minds of its receivers. For this reason, his critique of metanarratives is deeply intertwined with a vehement attack on realism. In criticizing realism, however, he is not merely dismissive of a period or literary style but fundamentally skeptical of art's ability to portray the real, implying that the attempt to depict reality is also a metanarrative. Suggesting a connection between Immanuel Kant's concept of the "sublime" and Friedrich Nietzsche's "perspectivism," which postulates that "'facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretation'"