

The Victory of the Introduction: Plot Structures in Long-Form Narrative

Long-form narratives have room to lengthen each phase of the narrative as much as they like. This appears as early as the Homeric epics. The penchant for a lengthy introductory phase reappears in the early Greek novels. These texts draw from the Homeric poems and exaggerate features that suit their new genre particularly well. The exaggeration of the introductory phase grows over time until it extends to the point of making up almost the entire texts.

The *Iliad*'s introductory phase takes up nearly the first third of the poem (Lowe 2000), and the *Odyssey*'s stretches fully to half of the poem before Odysseus finally comes back to his home and can begin the process of re-acquiring his position. The Homeric poems had audiences who already knew the stories they were telling and their backstories, and still they devote this much space to explaining how their characters got into the situations of the main plots. When the novels begin telling original stories on a scale rivaling epic poems, the motivation to introduce the characters and settings was even stronger.

Chariton, the earliest of the novelists, must introduce his original characters and set up their separation and the obstacles to their reunion before the main plot of this and later Greek novels (Hägg 1983) can really begin: his protagonist's reunion with her original husband and true love. It is not until the fourth book out of eight that this plot begins. The pattern established by the Homeric epics, that the first half of a story can be about the set-up, proves useful for the new genre that builds on many patterns from Homer. Achilles Tatius follows this pattern as well, introducing his characters, sending them on adventures, and separating them before ending his introductory section quite strongly in, once again, the fourth book out of eight, (Grethlein, 2016) and shifting to the main plot, again the reunion of the separated lovers.

Achilles Tatius plays around within the existing structure of the genre, but after him Longus and Heliodorus shift and play with the fundamental structure itself. In Longus the lovers are not separated until partway through the final book. This is commonly interpreted as an absence of the separation and travel phase of the standard Greek novel plot (Hägg 1983) but the separation does in fact occur, when Daphnis is recognized by the parents who exposed him. They are separated by status (and a brief kidnapping). This is then overcome and they marry on the last page of the novel. What has happened is not a complete repression of the adventure phase of the plot but an extreme delay of it, after a great many false starts. The phase where the characters are introduced has been hugely elongated, as the audience is not only meeting these new characters but watching them form. The original main plot of separation and reunion has been reduced and restricted to the end of the novel.

Heliodorus explicitly patterns his novel after the *Odyssey* (Morgan 2008), and has strong closural elements exactly in the middle of the novel (Grethlein 2016) as part of that. The *Odyssey* required a homecoming before the main plot started, however, and in Heliodorus' novel the final return home for the protagonist is not until the very last book, just as in Longus. The marriage does not quite make it into the novel, but is instead going to happen right after the last scene. In the last of the Greek novels, the main story of the reunion of the lovers has been displaced by Heliodorus' more original material to such a degree that their marriage does not make it into the text, and the travels that the *Odyssey* treated as the last part of the introduction now dominate the story.

The Greek novels begin by building on the structures of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and then as the genre matures they experiment with those structures and manipulate them to suit the new form. The original stories require a heavier emphasis on the introductory phase of the story,

which the Homeric epics had already given license for extending to great length, and as time went on the introduction grew to encompass almost the entire novels. The stereotyped main plot of the lovers' reunion was de-emphasized in favor of more unique material.

Bibliography

Grethlein, J. (2016). Minding the Middle in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*: False Closure, Triangular Foils and Self-Reflection. *The Classical Quarterly*, 66, pp 316-335.

Hägg, T. *The Novel in Antiquity*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983.

Lowe, N. J. *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Morgan, J. "Intertextuality." *The Greek and Roman Novel*. Ed. T. Whitmarsh. Cambridge University Press, 2008.