In his concept of *narrative progression, Phelan proposes a *rhetorical model which sees plot as a movement with a particular affective power on the reader (*see* AUDIENCE; READER-RESPONSE THEORY). Studying a narrative's progression involves investigating 'how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers' interests in narrative' (1989: 15). Phelan focuses on how a narrative's design, particularly its ending, is determined by its beginning and middle. The understanding of plot involved in the concept of progression concerns the interplay between the representation of character and the resolution of 'instabilities' in the story, and their effect on the reader's own judgement and the 'experiential dynamics' of the narrative. Narrative progression therefore concerns the process by which narratives are 'developing wholes' (15) moving towards closure. However, as Phelan shows, only some narratives reach a state of 'completeness' in their ultimate overall design, because, in addition to coming to a point of closure, they also resolve the instabilities they have created.

Applying *possible-worlds theory to narrative fiction, Ryan (1991) proposes understanding plot as the aggregate of a number of different worlds (domains) represented in the text: these worlds consist primarily of events projected within the subjective worlds of characters' minds (*see* TEXT-WORLD APPROACH TO NARRATIVE). A radical extension of Bremond's original idea of plot as a 'network of possibilities', Ryan's approach substantially revises the traditional structuralist conceptions of plot either as a story summary or as the discourse's rearrangement of story. Plot in this definition is the interaction of virtual and actual worlds (*see* MODALITY; VIRTUALITY). The 'private' worlds of characters (constituted by their wishes, knowledge, intentions, and obligations) can deviate from or be in *conflict with the 'reality' of the textual actual world (TAW), thereby generating *tellability – the stuff of interesting narrative and absorbing plots. Ryan's concept of the 'diversification principle' refers to tellable narratives with an ontologically pluralistic event structure, in which conflict is generated by clashes between alternate possible worlds; by contrast, uninteresting plots lack diversification into actual and virtual worlds.

The above range of applications and interpretations show that plot can never be arrested in one clear and stable definition. The plurality of plot theories and definitions reveals the sheer impossibility of isolating the essential nature of plot due to the intricate dynamics of the temporal dimension of narrative. 'Plot' itself is thus too complex to be satisfactorily enclosed or 'plotted' by one definition.

SEE ALSO: narrative structure; narrative techniques

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